

AN ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION CENTER FOR THE TURTLES IN MASIRAH ISLAND

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Masirah Island is situated off the eastern shore of Oman and is the largest island of the Sultanate. Its perimeter hosts a number of sandy beaches where four species of sea turtles nest every year; over 400 species of birds live in its mudflats, beaches and wadis; fossils are encountered in some of its hills; a large number of mollusks exist in the sea; and a pristine coral reef is present in the south of the island.

Inspired by all this ecological wealth and the need for better knowledge and protection in view of forthcoming development, the Masirah Turtle Conservation Project (MTCP) began. Sponsored by the TOTAL Corporate Foundation for biodiversity and the sea and TOTAL Oman and carried out with the expertise of IPEDEX Productions L.L.C. under the auspices of the Directorate-General of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, MTCP has been present on the island with a group of researchers from different parts of the world for almost four years. It was the first time that a private company cooperated with the Omani government on such an environmental project. For three years, experts on marine turtles, birds, reefs, mollusks, environmental education, environmental institutions, legislation and sustainable development came to Masirah and contributed to its protection and conservation, following the Omani government's strict policies on sustainable development.

Along with developing environmental education packages for local schools, finding out interesting scientific data about sea turtles and avifauna and a creating a management plan for sustainable development, the TOTAL/IPEDEX team delivered something else to Masirah as well: The first ever Environmental Information Center in Oman, inspired by sea turtles, describing Masirah's particular ecological wealth for everyone to see: locals, school children and visitors to the island.

Environmental Information Centers (EICs) are present in several countries, especially in remote areas where setting up and maintaining big museums is not easy. Their purpose is to provide a constant, easily understandable and informative set of panels, in order to present the particular environmental and cultural assets of the area, thus contributing to understanding, appreciation and conservation. Designed by an international team of experts, the EIC of Masirah includes information on sea turtles at an international, national and local level, the birds and coral reef of Masirah, the whales and dolphins, as well as a display of 250 molluscs found on Masirah beaches, including the endemic "Eloise" shell, named after the wife of Dr Donald Bosch

Set in the new Masirah Municipality building, the EIC provides information on the environment of the island. Its panels comprise photos selected from those taken by project photographers. Text boxes and graphics have also been produced in order to explain the movements of sea turtles in the region.

The visitor of the EIC begins by getting to know Masirah and its people from the first introductory panel on the left after they enter through the door. "Masirah: a welcoming wonder of nature" is the title of the panel, and the impressive photos describe it all. The text provides some details about economic activities, ecology and a tribute to the amazing hospitality of the population on the island. Walking clockwise, the whales and dolphins encountered offshore Masirah are identified and briefly described. Cetaceans have been the object of long-term studies around the island by researchers from all over the world and some of them have formed resident populations present there for many years. Continuing to the left, the visitor is greeted by a "flying" crab plover over a beach and a greater flamingo "flying" over a mudflat. Under these "flying" birds, three tables describing the avifauna on the island per category prepare the visitor for what he is about to see during his explorations, binoculars and camera in hand.

Dominating the EIC, turtles occupy the wall and by-walls facing the entrance. Three-dimensional, almost life-size figurines of the leatherback, the loggerhead, the green, the Olive Ridley and the hawksbill turtle are "floating" in a light blue background alluding to the sea, so the visitor can admire their looks and notice their similarities and



Fig1. Loggerhead turtle on Dahriya beach, Masirah (©Martin Gaethlich/MTCP).



Fig2. Loggerhead turtle panel in EIC (©Martin Gaethlich/MTCP).

differences. Information on all five species is available on five individual wall panels including maps with their main nesting sites, while two tables describe the life cycles, dangers and crucial role of the sea turtle for the world's oceans. After the turtles, visitor find themselves "immersed" in a panel imitating the waters hosting the coral reef of Masirah Island. The importance of coral reefs worldwide and the description of the pristine reef of Masirah dominate this panel and before continuing with the visit, the guest can't help but take their time exploring all the creatures situated in the panel: Turtles, anemone fish, corals, cuttlefish and many more. Five showcases of seashells follow. Some 250 species of both bivalves and gastropods collected on the island and donated to the museum by a long-time Masirah resident, Mr Martyn Day, are displayed. A panel on the wall describes mollusks and the importance of the summer monsoon's influence for them in Oman.

Masirah Island is there for everyone to discover. Should you visit, make sure you pass by the EIC first. It will turn your visit into a more knowledgeable and interesting one.

References

- ¹Bosch, D. & Bosch, E., 1982, *Seashells of Oman*, illust. col. Longman Group, London, UK. 206 and Bosch, D. et al., *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*, Motivate Publishing 2008, Dubai, UAE, 179.



Fig3. Loggerhead hatchlings heading to the sea, Biyadh Beach, Masirah (©Martin Gaethlich/MTCP).