KUWAIT TURTLE NESTING SEASON 2009: LOW AND CHALLENGING

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It has been a challenging monitoring season for the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (www.kuwaitturtles.com). Kick-started in July 2008 under sponsorship of TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait, in close cooperation with the Voluntary Work Center Kuwait (especially its active Senyar team), and The Scientific Center of Kuwait, KTCP sent its international team of researchers, turtling apprentices and volunteers to Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim islands. The team's missions were carried out at regular intervals over the last six months in order to learn more about turtles in the country who seem to prefer the sandy beaches of these tiny islets for annual nesting. Unlike last year, a "scouting" year of investigation, this year more gear was packed in the team's luggage, including satellite transmitters (Kiwisat), flipper tags and temperature / humidity measuring i-buttons.

Teams began visiting the islands as early as March 2009 and continued until the beginning of October. Monitoring was done with dedication and discipline on land and in the water, sometimes around the clock with little or no sleep. Team members were determined to decipher the turtles' foraging, mating, nesting and hatching habits on the islets as well documenting their beach and marine ecosystems.

Much information about the islands' marine ecosystems was obtained, with vibrant reefs hosting more than 87 fish species (many of which were spawning) as well as many crustaceans and invertebrates which shall hopefully be described in following articles. Umm Al-Maradim was revealed as a spot of importance for birdlife with more than 45 bird species recorded on its 65 hectares. Oil seeps were commonly observed from the seabed in Qaru Island this year, the sea life seemingly unaffected by it. Sand temperatures were on average lower than last year.

The turtles did not come in high numbers. Nine pits of Hawksbill turtles were discovered in Umm Al-Maradim island from mid-May till the end of June. After a gap of three months, researchers discovered another pit, which was probably a nest, in October. As suspected from previous years, Hawksbills in Kuwait seem to have an "early" and a "late" nesting season, at least in Umm Al-Maradim. Though not seen nesting, the coast guard provided recent photos and video clearly demonstrating Hawksbill turtles nesting. Further proof of Hawksbills nesting in Qaru was given to KTCP in both July and August, with one dead Hawksbill hatchling found on each of two beach areas during morning surveys. An adult male Hawksbill was encountered in near shore waters in Qaru in both July and August, seemingly foraging.

Fig 1: The first satellite tagged green turtle on Qaru Island, Kuwait, August 2009 (© Mohammad Hamza/KTCP).

Fig 2: The first Arabic girls' school in Kuwait where KTCP held a presentation about turtles in Kuwait (© Ali Alhafez/KTCP).

Unlike last year, when the team suspected a Green turtle nest on Umm Al-Maradim, no such evidence arose this year. Green turtle pits made their appearance only on Qaru in the first few days of July. The numbers of females remained low.

Only eleven Green turtle pits showed up in Qaru. One turtle was repeatedly encountered by the team during the early August mission. It was subsequently flipper- and satellite tagged, and three i-buttons were inserted in its nest. I-buttons are button-shaped aluminium humidity and temperature loggers inserted by researchers in a turtle's nest. After 70 days they are dug out, read by computer through a USB adaptor and give valuable information about developments in the nest such as hatching dates and an estimation of the hatchlings' sex ratio. Hatching information about the marked Green turtle nest of August 15th is hopefully to be provided soon, when the nest is dug out by researchers and the i-buttons retrieved.

Environmental education remains another major KTCP goal. So far the local teaching community has responded to the team's offer with enthusiasm. The team has also explored Failaka Island for potential nesting grounds, following reports of local population about sightings of turtles in both water and land. The team did not discover clear nesting grounds there, but made the discovery that turtles are sometimes consumed for food.

The turtles of Kuwait are still here. The next nesting season is approaching fast, and the team is ready to continue its efforts.

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References available on the version posted on the wmenews website.