

FAILAKA ISLAND HADRAS: A MENACE FOR DWINDLING BIODIVERSITY?

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Hadra, turtle, Failaka Island, Kuwait

As part of the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project and following reports of our Kuwaiti team members that “*there were turtles in the waters around Failaka Island*”, we ventured there on the weekend of November 6th. This was to scout for turtle presence on the island and integrate our findings into our sea turtle research and conservation work, sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait and under the auspices of the Voluntary Work Centre Kuwait and the Scientific Centre of Kuwait.

Failaka Island lies twenty kilometres east of Kuwait City and fifty kilometres from the southernmost tip of Iraq. Its area is approximately twenty-four square kilometres. It is triangular in shape with its base in the west and head in the southeast. It is 14 km in length and its breadth varies between 8 km in the west and 2 km in the east. The island is flat, apart from a small hill thirty feet high in the extreme western part. Hellenistic ruins have been discovered on the island, along with Dilmun ruins from 5,000 BC and excavations are still ongoing by Kuwaiti and Western archaeologists.

Combining a desert inland and contoured by tidal mudflats, Failaka is not, as it turns out, a nesting stronghold for turtles. KTCP team members, mainly involved with turtle nesting areas on Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim islets in the south of Kuwait, toured the perimeter of the Island looking for tracks, old or new nests and any other possible evidence of turtle presence on the beaches but found nothing, except for a suspected old turtle nesting area, surprisingly situated next to the dock of the ferry boat. However, Green (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) turtles come to the shallows close to the coast to either forage or mate, and there they often perish, unfortunately not due to some natural process, but because they get trapped in a ‘hadra’.

A ‘hadra’ is a coastal fish trap, traditional to Kuwait and to some other Arabian Gulf countries. It entails setting up a barrier of reeds around a limited area off the coast. At the end of the barrier, an enclosure made of two parts is erected. The bigger part is called “Al Housh”, followed by a smaller one called “Al Ser”, which lies at the limits of ebb tides. There are many hadras constructed along the seashores of Failaka Island, in past years all along the shores of mainland Kuwait as well. During low tides, fishermen collect fish, which are trapped in the hadra. KTCP members were told by locals that turtles often get caught in there and are often harvested for food by fishermen, who are mostly unaware of these animals’ worldwide protection status. Rays, sharks, seabirds and small dolphins - resident populations of Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (*Sousa plumbea*), that are part of the island’s marine wildlife – often get caught in the hadras as well, dying a slow and purposeless death only to be discarded as “useless” by the fishermen who are interested in what are considered “edible fish”.

The geographical area of the island and Kuwait in general has suffered major ecological disasters, such as the massive oil spills following the Gulf War of 1990, the fires of the oil wells set by invading Iraqi forces and currently the raw sewage crisis which began in September 2009 and is ongoing, with unknown consequences on the marine environment of the country.



Fig 1. Hadra Fish Trap on Miskan Island (close to Failaka) (© N. Papathanasopoulou/KTCP).



Fig 2. Green turtle remains in a Failaka house courtyard. (© Claire von Ribbeck/KTCP).

Ten years ago, hadras were common all along the coastline of Kuwait but acknowledging the severe damage on marine wildlife the government banned them by law. Nowadays, special permits are needed for owning hadras and the population has been discouraged from using them. Very few are being encountered now on the mainland. But Failaka island and nearby islet Miskan are exempted from this law and KTCP team members encountered fifteen on Failaka and six on Miskan. Kuwait is a wealthy Gulf country where professional and recreational fishing are very popular. Most of it is exercised sustainably, with the 70 government shrimp trawlers operating their nets using TEDs (Turtle Excluder Devices), true pioneers of this practice in the region.

With the marine environment under such stress in the Gulf and in Kuwait itself, it is hoped that the practice of hadra, or any unsustainable fishing practice, shall soon be abandoned, giving wildlife the chance it deserves in regenerating and surviving the many existing trials of life the trying waters of the Gulf are ensuring for them. Government and NGOs should cooperate and raise an awareness campaign preceding an eventual legal and institutional framework to address this serious issue.



Fig 3. Green turtle in Kuwait (©David Robinson/KTCP).