

THREE HAWKSBILL TURTLES SATELLITE TAGGED IN KUWAIT FOR THE FIRST TIME

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Sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait and in cooperation with the Voluntary Work Center and the Scientific Center, the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (KTCP – www.kuwaitturtles.com) has been studying sea turtle populations on islets Garooh and Umm Al-Maradim since June 2008. In addition to night and morning surveys for nesting females, diving and snorkeling expeditions in search for foraging and mating individuals from April to October, KTCP also planned a satellite telemetry project. This was in order to establish migratory routes of both nesting species, Hawksbill and Green turtles. As Hawksbills are the first to nest in the season (May and June), KTCP team members, in cooperation with Mr Alan F. Rees of the University of Exeter, UK, traveled to islands Umm Al-Maradim and Garooh with the purpose of attaching satellite transmitters on turtles encountered there.

Within a few hours, on the night of the 24th of May, two Hawksbill females crawled out of the water on to the south beach of the island with the purpose of digging a nest in which to lay eggs. Despite a fierce sandstorm, which made things difficult, KTCP team members successfully attached satellite transmitters on both turtles and released them back into the sea in the late hours of the night. The first turtle, which they named Nada, measured about a meter in length and the second one, Dareen, was smaller measuring about 80 centimeters in total.

Dareen had not nested when intercepted by the tagging team, but came out to nest successfully the following night, her transmitter safely on her carapace.

In Garooh a few days later, on the quiet evening of June 29th and at very low tide, another small Hawksbill turtle crawled out of the water in front of the Coast Guard station and looked for an appropriate place to nest. She changed her mind and as she was returning to the water, the KTCP team encountered her and attached a third satellite transmitter on her. Najat, this third turtle, was seen attempting to nest the night after she was tagged and finally came and laid her eggs in a shallow nest in front of the Coast Guard Station.



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Fig. 1: Alan Rees of KTCP and the team attaching a satellite transmitter on a Hawksbill turtle in Umm Al-Maradim in May 2010.



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Fig. 2: Nada, the first ever turtle satellite tagged in Kuwait.

A fourth turtle was encountered on Garooh the night before Najat was tagged, but the team only attached flipper tags on her and not a satellite transmitter, as the animal had a large crack on her shell, most likely due to an unpleasant encounter with a fast moving vessel (boat or jet ski).

Satellite tracking is one of the most important and significant tools for researchers to acquire knowledge on these animals' migrations. Tracking the movements of turtles throughout the planet's seas and oceans contributes to improving conservation strategies and understanding characteristics of the ocean itself wherever turtles go. This invaluable information may not only improve turtle conservation but also the conservation of fisheries and coral reefs.

KTCP shall continue its missions on islets Garooh and Umm Al-Maradim throughout the summer, flipper and satellite tagging the turtles it encounters. For more updates on this action, please visit http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/?project_id=503 in order to obtain more detailed information and maps of the three Kuwaiti Hawksbill turtles' movements in the last few days. If you wish, you can also "adopt" the animal of your choice, thus contributing actively to satellite tracking efforts in Kuwait. As observed on the maps on this tracking page, the first two turtles tagged in Umm al-Maradim have left the perimeter of the island and seem to have begun migrating away. Is this accurate? Or is the inter-nesting period not finished? Where will they go? If all goes according to plan and the transmitters stay on, these secrets may be revealed for the first time in the course of the next few weeks and months.

Apart from the dedication and expert skills of the KTCP team, a very special thanks should be attributed to His Excellency the Assistant Undersecretary of Border Security Affairs, Major General Mohammed Yousef Al-Sabah for his enthusiastic and precious support as well as to all Coast Guard Officers and personnel in Khairan, Garooh and Umm Al-Maradim for their friendship and help. Without them, the project would never be able to achieve its goals.