



Feature

Marine turtle conservation challenges in southwest Madagascar

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Emma Gibbons, Director of the NGO ReefDoctor, based in southwest Madagascar, offers some astute observations about the challenges of conserving marine turtle in that corner of the Indian Ocean: In the small fishing community of Ifaty, just one of thirteen villages in the Bay of Ranobe, Southwest Madagascar, over 300 marine turtles have been slaughtered in the first seven months of 2016. This represents an increase of 29% over the same period in the same village in the previous year, and is more than double the number of turtles caught in the whole of 2010. The cause behind this dramatic increase in the harvest of turtles may be attributed to a number of factors. The rural southwest of the country, where most of the population already live in extreme poverty, is getting poorer. Overexploited fisheries, once the lifeblood of these communities, can no longer provide for an adequate income, and fishermen are increasingly hunting those species with a high market value. Large green turtles regularly sell for \$50-60 USD – more than the monthly income of an average fisherman and are therefore an alluring catch. At the same time, smaller, juvenile turtles, which sell for as little as \$3 USD, are also caught. For desperate fishermen living day-to-day, no catch is ever thrown back, no matter how small, and the harvest of juveniles continues to be a drain on turtle populations.



The fishermen of southwest Madagascar have a history of hunting turtles, and there are many fomba, or customs surrounding their catch and consumption. Traditionally, the sale of turtles was taboo, and their meat was reserved for village elders. The slaughter of turtles followed a prescribed ritual, and the act of eating the meat was steeped in ceremony. These customs helped maintain low levels of turtle harvest.

The last few decades however, have seen a great dilution of fomba. The arrival of coastal migrants, with differing customs, as well as the readily available meat on large turtles created a strong market.

The need to provide for one's family has taken priority over ancient traditions, and opened turtle access. In 2015, large, strong fishing nets, hundreds of metres long and designed specifically to ensnare turtles, were introduced to the Bay of Ranobe. An abrupt increase in the number of turtles caught in the fishery quickly followed.

Madagascar has a population growth rate of 2.8%, one of the highest in Africa. Especially in rural communities, large families act as an insurance policy against misfortune and tough times, and provide an effective workforce – a small fleet of fishermen providing for the family. In Ifaty it is not uncommon for families to have 8 or 9 children, and given the limited job opportunities and poor education level of the community, most of these children are destined to become fishermen. The number of fishing boats in Ifaty increases every year, adding more fishing pressure on the marine resources. It is therefore unsurprising that the number of turtles caught in the fishery continues to increase.

It is clear that the conservation of marine turtles is more of a social problem than a biological one, and cannot be solved with traditional conservation approaches. While the turtle fishery is technically illegal, enforcement agencies lack the resources to effectively police it, and sporadic enforcement only drives communities deeper into poverty and black market fisheries. Marine protected areas, while useful conservation tools, are unlikely to achieve success in a community struggling to catch enough fish to survive.

Turtles can be a species of high tourism value, and throughout Madagascar many appeals have been made to protect turtles for this reason. However, the majority of fishermen are so far removed from the tourism industry, that all this awareness raising falls on deaf ears. Impoverished fishermen are unlikely to forgo a lucrative catch so that hotel and restaurant owners can become wealthier.

Social problems need social solutions, and conservation efforts must address the extreme poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods which drive the turtle fishery. For ReefDoctor, the marine conservation organisation based in the village of Ifaty, it is this understanding which guides their turtle conservation projects. By providing skills training and entry to aquaculture activities, ReefDoctor provides a sustainable livelihood option to turtle fishermen, with the potential to earn enough money to rise above the poverty line. Over 85 families in Ifaty have benefited from farming seaweed through this initiative. These fishermen also participate in ReefDoctor's tag and release program for juvenile turtles. When a young turtle is accidentally caught in fishing nets, it is brought to ReefDoctor's turtle team where its biological information is recorded and it is fitted with a unique tag, with the help of the fishermen who caught it. The fishermen then return the turtle to the ocean. In the first seven months of 2016, 105 juvenile turtles have been released in this way. This represents over 70% of all juvenile turtles caught in the village of Ifaty.

By engaging fishermen in the conservation process, they have an opportunity to consider a new perspective on the management of their marine resources – the first step in a participatory approach to turtle conservation.

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For more information, visit: www.reefdoctor.org

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