

# NGOs INVOLVEMENT IN SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT IN THE ASEAN REGION

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper summarizes the recent or on-going initiatives of NGOs in the ASEAN region in sea turtle conservation and management. It is based on feedback and reports from various countries within the ASEAN region. The key factor for the success in the sea turtle conservation efforts of NGOs in this region is the close collaboration existing with local government and community groups of that particular area. While many of the conditions that have contributed to the success of the initiatives are specific to the country and the site, there could be lessons to be learnt which could be of great use in designing participatory conservation strategies in other countries.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sea turtle conservation and management initiatives in the ASEAN countries are facing similar issues. The key threats to be addressed include the commercial exploitation of turtle eggs, coastal development, fishery-related impact, pollution, sea turtle related legislation and impact of uncontrolled tourism which have a negative impact on the turtle population in the region.

NGOs, with established working partnership with the local governments and communities have played a critical role in initiating and facilitating sea turtle conservation in the ASEAN region. This paper presents the NGOs' efforts in sea turtle conservation in the Southeast Asian region.

Sources of information that contributed to this paper included write-ups, project proposals and reports written by local NGOs of the respective countries and discussions held with WWF counterparts in the various countries.

## CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THAILAND

The two main nesting areas for sea turtles in the Thai waters are the Khram Island and the Andaman Sea Coast. On the Andaman Coast, the important nesting sites included the Phuket Island and Phang Nga, situated within the Sirinath National Park. Although the Park is one of the major turtle nesting beaches in the area and is legally protected, poor enforcement means nesting turtles are still vulnerable to external threats.

In 1990 the Phuket Environmental Conservation Club with the support of Wildlife Fund Thailand started a small project on Phuket to campaign and disseminate information on the critical situation of sea turtles in the area. The project received a positive response from the general public in the area, especially from Mai Kao villagers who formed their own local conservation club, patrolled the beaches, gathered the eggs for hatching before they were poached and released the young hatchlings into the sea with the assistance of the local NGOs. Later in 1991, the villagers established the 'Mai Kao Sea Turtle Conservation Fund'. In order to strengthen and expand on the past efforts and activities of the Mai Kao villagers, Wildlife Fund Thailand and the Phuket Environmental Conservation Club considered it necessary to continue the support of sea turtle conservation efforts in the area through various participatory activities with the Mai Kao group as well as others. The aim of the project is to conserve and

rehabilitate the Andaman Sea turtle populations in southern Thailand through participatory activities involving local village conservation clubs, schools and relevant Thai governmental offices.

The activities/objectives include, amongst others, the establishment of hatcheries and beach and sea patrol; gathering and collating information and data on sea turtle in the Andaman Sea for use in further educational/research activities, dissemination of information on the ecology of the sea turtles and future planning and conservation efforts; supporting, strengthening and assisting local organizations in having an increased role in the management and conservation of sea turtles; co-ordinating co-operative efforts to manage and conserve sea turtles among governmental agencies and the community at all levels; and campaigning and building an increased understanding and awareness of sea turtle conservation and coastal ecology among the general public.

The degree of success of the conservation programme is largely dictated by the degree of involvement of the local communities who utilises the marine and coastal resources, in particular if the local communities themselves primarily initiated the conservation effort.

The on-going turtle conservation project in Thailand was also partly funded the Magic Eyes Chao Phraya Barge Programme, a subsidiary of Thai Environmental and Community Development Association (TECDA) and the Royal Thai Navy for six years. The donation collected through the 'We love sea turtle fund' is channelled to the Royal Thai Navy which utilise it via its sea turtle feeding and breeding programme. The Navy has been able to expand the breeding area located at the Naval base in the Phang-Nga Province in the southern part of Thailand and at Khram Island of the Chonburi Province in the east. The Royal Navy, occasionally with the help of the Fisheries Department, organises a yearly 'release of hatchlings' event during the Songkran Festival.

## **CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN PHILIPPINES**

The Philippine Turtle Islands has been identified as a significant green turtle rookery in Asia. The Philippine Government, through the Pawikan Conservation Project (PCP), Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (PAWB-PCP) is mandated to implement protection and management measures for the conservation of sea turtles in the islands. Thus, Philippine's Turtle Islands Integrated Conservation and Development Project (TIICDP), an exemplar of collaborative Government and NGO approach for management and conservation, was conceived. This joint collaboration, initiated through Memorandum of Agreement between Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and WWF Philippines in 1996, aims to enhance the participation of local communities in conservation while providing them economic opportunities to eventually wean them from turtle egg collection.

Among the initiatives carried out include information and education communications programme, lobby for the establishment of Turtle Islands as a protected area, conduct bio-physical studies, implementation of livelihood programme and the production of ecotourism guidelines for the Turtle Islands. WWF's Endangered Seas Campaign supported the integrated conservation and development approach by introducing to the residents of the Turtle Islands a sustainable alternative source of income in the hope that the residents will not be dependent on turtle egg collection and illegal fishing methods for livelihood in the future.

WWF, in collaboration with PCP has also initiated the establishment of the world's first trans-boundary turtle management via Turtle Islands Heritage Protected Area (TIHPA) between Sabah Parks and PCP, seen as the first step towards a regional turtle conservation strategy. Under this programme, collaborative scientific research, the management and study of cases would be carried out.

## CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN VIETNAM

The nesting beaches of Con Dao are considered the most important beaches for sea turtles in Vietnam, especially for the green and hawksbill turtles. No specific study on sea turtles has ever been conducted in Vietnam. However, encroachment of coastal development, fishing and consumption of turtle eggs have been thought to have caused the serious decline in turtle population in Vietnam. To address the situation, a marine turtle conservation project at Con Dao National Park was established. The park is in actual an island archipelago of Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province, located to the southeast of the coast of South Vietnam. The effort was with the help of recommendations by marine experts from WWF Philippines in protecting and conserving nesting beaches for hawksbill and green turtles.

Amongst the activities implemented included setting-up of hatcheries in which researches and hatchery management are carried out; project staff training in technical skills and conservation concepts; awareness programme which included workshops for park staff and local authorities, talks and presentation for school students; beach clean-up activity and erecting of several information bill-boards around the park.

## CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN MALAYSIA

WWF Malaysia (WWFM) has been in the forefront of sea turtle conservation since the 1970s. The most recent initiative exists in the form of a working relationship partnership with the government through the Department of Fisheries Malaysia (DoFM) and collaboration with donors in the Ma' Daerah Turtle Education and Awareness Project. Recently nesting beaches stretching from Rhu Khudung, Tanjung Batu, Chakar Hutan and Ma' Daerah have been reserved for turtle egg collection by the State Government of Terengganu. The DoFM was given the mandate to manage the area consistent with the turtle conservation management in Terengganu. Sandy beaches between Paka and Kertih have historically functioned as important nesting grounds for marine turtles. However, coastal development and human consumption of turtle eggs have had a negative impact on the population which is on the decline.

In view of the situation WWFM, with financial resources from BP Amoco and close collaboration with the DoFM, has conducted a Turtle Education and Awareness Programme at Ma' Daerah Turtle Sanctuary Centre commencing from June 1999. The Centre, managed by DoFM, was established with financial resources provided by BP Petronas Acetyls and comprises of a hatchery and an interpretation centre. A steering committee comprises relevant stakeholders have been set up with the role to co-ordinate in bringing different stakeholders together in various open dialogues, seminars and workshops in order to facilitate discussions, analyse and resolve problems and issues. This is an important strategy for the various interest groups to better understand each other's perspectives and come up with mutually acceptable solutions.

The activities vital to overall conservation of sea turtles which have and are still implemented by WWFM are as follows:

### (a) Hatchery Management

Through substantial research on sea turtles over the years, WWFM has gathered a substantial body of information with regard to best practices in hatchery and sanctuary management, including *ex-situ* management.

### (b) Education and Awareness

An integral component of turtle conservation, WWFM has been active in implementing turtle education and awareness campaigns, the most recent event was the Turtle Education and Awareness Project at Ma' Daerah Turtle Sanctuary Centre. WWFM aims to develop specific and targeted education and awareness programmes for the local communities in the area which

includes, amongst others, the school children, fishermen, teachers, local villagers and the business community. The objective of the programme would be to encourage and promote community participation and responsibility in sea turtle conservation.

(c) Turtle Management and Conservation

WWFM has conducted studies on the nesting population status of marine turtles in Paka-Kertih which resulted in the production of several printed materials and numerous management recommendation to the local authorities to better manage and conserve marine turtles at the Paka-Kertih rookery.

(d) Policy/Legislation Development

WWFM has reviewed the status of the current legislation pertaining status of sea turtle in the various states of Malaysia and has proposed and actively pursued for an improvement and updating of the legislation in view of the inadequacy of the existing policy especially to the status of the important nesting beaches.

(e) Overall Turtle Management and Resource Use Planning

WWFM has facilitated in bringing external turtle expert for capacity building and training in the past. By inviting sea turtle experts in the like of Dr. Jeanne Mortimer and Dr. Colin Limpus for training in sea turtle management techniques. As a member of the Terengganu Turtle Sanctuary Advisory Council, WWFM is in a position to monitor turtle conservation efforts in the state and contribute towards formulating effective conservation and management strategies.

## CONCLUSION

It is obvious that no single approach can be successfully emulated in every country in Southeast Asian Region to produce effective and successful sea turtle conservation. Each strategy in each country is unique as various internal and external factors contributes toward determining the best conservation approach. However, turtle conservation should continue to involve the local communities and the government with the facilitation of NGOs. A close and functional working relationship of NGOs with the stakeholders especially the local governments and community is a requisite for the success of turtle conservation in the region.

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