



## Feature

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### WIOMSA Scientific Symposium offers backdrop for turtle talks

( 31 August 2009 )



The Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) organised a successful Sixth Scientific Symposium in St. Denis, La Réunion (France) from 24-29 August 2009. From its modest beginnings, the biennial symposium has gone from strength to strength in recent years – now attracting hundreds of participants from across the region and well beyond. The scientific programme was rich in content and covered a remarkably wide diversity of topics, in both oral and poster presentations. Marine turtles were well represented – alongside related subjects, such as community-based conservation, socio-economics, fisheries management, marine protected areas, and marine ecology.

The WIOMSA gathering has evolved to become an important venue for young researchers from the region to demonstrate their scientific work and to exchange information with their peers. Also impressive was the number of researchers and institutions present from outside the region, particularly from Europe, with a keen interest in the Western Indian Ocean. Congratulations are due to the all of the organisers – especially the (exhausted) team in La Réunion – for having put on such an impressive event.

The Symposium provided a backdrop for several gatherings of direct interest to the IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU, beginning with an informal meeting of the WIO-Marine Turtle Task Force, hosted by Kélonia – Marine Turtle Observatory on 23 August. Although only a few members and observers were able to attend, the gathering provided an opportunity for participants to catch up on developments over the previous year, as well as new initiatives, and to explore ways to build a more cohesive network of interested turtle conservationists.

During the Symposium itself, a training workshop was organised to emphasise the importance of standardised beach monitoring protocols and long-term data collection for the benefit of turtle conservation. Led by Dr. Jack Frazier (IOSEA Advisory Committee Chair) and Dr. Ronel Nel (WIO-MTTF Chair), the interactive workshop was well-attended by more than 30 enthusiastic participants. This captivating meeting highlighted, once again, the necessity of sharing information on best practices across the region, which the IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU is expressly intended to facilitate.

On 28 August, the Director of Kélonia, Stéphane Ciccione, generously hosted another small gathering which brought together various agencies associated with French marine turtle conservation efforts, and IOSEA Coordinator Douglas Hykle. Participants included representatives of the Groupe Tortues Marines France (GTMF), *l'Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer (Ifremer)*, *Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises (Taaf)* and the *Direction Régionale de l'Environnement (DIREN) - Réunion*. Information was exchanged about ongoing coordination efforts, planned project activities, and ways of enhancing French involvement in IOSEA. Details were provided of an important meeting in Paris, scheduled for January 2010, which will bring together French marine turtle practitioners from around the world.

Aside from these formal meetings, the WIOMSA Symposium offered many opportunities to exchange information with familiar colleagues, to learn about valuable work being carried out in the region by small and large non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations, and to make concrete plans for the future. Indeed, in their very last exchange Douglas Hykle and Stéphane Ciccione mused about the possibility of the next meeting of IOSEA Signatory States being organised in La Réunion, if interest could be generated among the responsible authorities.

As a focus of marine turtle conservation in the sub-region, with an added bonus of being able to offer French language interpretation, La Réunion would certainly be an excellent candidate to host IOSEA SS6 – not to mention its spectacular scenery, moderate climate, and welcoming multicultural environment.

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