



Profile of the Month

Towards operationalising the IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network

(May 2016)

Source: Douglas Hykle, IOSEA Coordinator

Photos: c/o Seychelles Islands Foundation

The Network of Sites of Importance for Marine Turtles in the Indian Ocean – South-East Asia Region was formally adopted by the Signatory States to the IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU at their Sixth Meeting, held in Bangkok in 2012; and ten sites were accepted into the Network when it was officially launched in September 2014.

A Discussion Group was formed in December 2015 for the purpose of exchanging ideas on operationalising the Site Network. More than a dozen members have now been identified for eight of the 10 participating sites.

One of the members – Clément Quétel, working in France's Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises (TAAF) – has described the Group's purpose very well:

“This type of initiative is indeed an effective tool to facilitate communication within the network. This group will encourage experience-sharing and regional cooperation, increase the coherence of actions in the Indian Ocean for marine turtles, and put in touch the various organisations involved in the conservation of these species. These exchanges will be also an opportunity to identify more easily the financing sources, institutional or by sponsorship.”

Early discussions within the Group have focused on: the need for official certification for each of the Network Sites, exchanging ideas about the design elements that ought to be incorporated into physical sign boards to be produced for each site, and summarising the key attributes of each site for the purpose of identifying common themes and opportunities for collaboration.

The Secretariat has now finalised the design of standard A3-size certificates to be presented to each Network Site. Focal Points will receive an attractive framed original and two extra copies for distribution as they see fit.

Ideas have been exchanged about the elements that ought to be featured on outdoor sign boards designed for public viewing at Network Sites, including: target messages; factual information in appropriate languages, together with images and maps; instructions aimed at influencing visitor behaviour, in the form of “Do and Don't” symbols; and contact details for responsible authorities, logos etc. These ideas will be summarised in a separate note.

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The main purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast different aspects of the eight Network Sites under consideration: **Aldabra Atoll** (Seychelles), **Bu Tinah Shoal** (United Arab Emirates), Europa Island (French Southern and Antarctic Lands – France), **iSimangaliso Wetland Park** (South Africa), **Rufiji Delta - Mafia Island Seascape** (United Republic of Tanzania), **Sheedvar Island** (Islamic Republic of Iran), **Sir Bu Na'air Island Protected Area** (United Arab Emirates), and Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary (Philippines). The Secretariat circulated a short questionnaire aimed at capturing as succinctly as possible the key attributes of each site; to begin to identify common challenges that might lend themselves to collective approaches (or at least sharing of experience and ideas); and to explore areas of existing expertise (e.g. in terms of methodology or programmatic approaches) at a given Network Site which might be applied elsewhere.

To achieve this, correspondents were asked to describe:

- (1) notable strengths and opportunities of their site (e.g. from the standpoint of ecology, socio-economic aspects, community involvement etc.);
- (2) the most important challenges their site is presently facing; and
- (3) noteworthy conservation activities presently happening or planned at the site in the near future, including activities that would possibly benefit from international collaboration.

The results of the questionnaire have been compiled in large (legal-size) tables containing the three sections mentioned above. When the sections are printed out and combined, they offer an overview of all of the active Network Sites.

Click to open Tables 1-3 (PDF): [Overview of Sites participating in the IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network.](#)

Note, however, that for a comprehensive picture of any given site it is best to refer to the original Site Network submissions, varying in length from 10-30 pages (click to open):

- [Aldabra Atoll](#) (Seychelles)
- [Bu Tinah Shoal](#) (Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)
- [Europa Island](#) (France)
- [iSimangaliso Wetland Park](#) (South Africa)
- [Rufiji Delta - Mafia Island Seascape](#) (United Republic of Tanzania)
- [Sheedvar Island](#) (Islamic Republic of Iran)
- [Sir Bu Na'air Protected Area](#) (Sharjah, U.A.E.)
- [Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary](#) (Philippines)

The proposals can also be found on the website:

<http://www.ioseaturtles.org/sitenetwork-directory.php>

(NB: Two countries with sites that have also been formally accepted into the Network – Myanmar and Comoros – have yet to finalise all of the required paperwork.)

From the “Notable strengths and opportunities” table, one can readily observe how extraordinary this collection of sites really is. Some of the sites boast of their regional

importance, for example, in terms of the number of nesting green turtles (e.g. Aldabra Atoll and Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary); while others emphasise their uniqueness (for example, Europa Island's unexploited biodiversity and Rufiji-Mafia Seascape's special claim to host all five species present in the Western Indian Ocean). Some of the areas have already been designated as World Heritage Sites (such as Aldabra Atoll and iSimangaliso Wetland Park, with one of the world's longest-running turtle monitoring programmes) or as internationally important wetland (Ramsar) sites – such as Sheedvar Island and Rufiji-Mafia Seascape.

Overall, it is clear that all of the sites are highly important for a wide range of biodiversity extending far beyond the realm of marine turtles. Not only do they support critical scientific research and long-term monitoring, many of them offer the potential for ecotourism that could provide a source of sustainable finance.

As one would expect from a selection of disparate sites, the range of real or potential challenges they face is quite diverse, but some common threads can be found among them. Four general categories have been identified.

<p>Direct human pressures</p> <p>Socio-economic constraints</p> <p>Broader development pressures</p> <p>Environmental challenges</p>
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Direct human pressures

Several of the sites mention human-level pressures impinging directly on the site, such as: (1) disturbance of nesting beaches; (2) illegal hunting and fishing, often by foreign actors – including, in the case of Rufiji-Mafia Seascape, targeted marine turtle take and trade; and (3) resource extraction leading to habitat destruction.

Socio-economic constraints

Apart from these anthropogenic pressures, other socio-economic issues come into play at a number of the sites, notably insufficient finance and human resources for site management, governance issues related to community engagement, and external threats such as piracy and other security concerns which disrupt normal operations (e.g. Aldabra Atoll and Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary).

Broader development pressures

Many of the sites are found in areas where oil and gas exploration, and peripheral seismic survey work, is pronounced (e.g. Bu Tinah Shoal, Europa, iSimangaliso). Several of the sites mention their close proximity to busy shipping lanes (e.g. Aldabra, Europa, Sir Bu Na'air), which carries the risk of environmental damage in the event of a serious oil spill. Partly related to this high level of human activity, some sites already experience significant pollution in the form of visible and invisible marine debris.

Europa, Sir Bu Na'air, and Rufiji-Mafia Seascape are particularly prone to a constant flow of marine debris, fed by strong winds and currents. South Africa has experienced a ten-fold increase in stranding of hatchlings, a high proportion of which were shown to have swallowed hard plastic fragments. Existing or planned industrial development in the surrounding area may also pose a threat to certain sites, notably Rufiji – Mafia Seascape and Sheedvar Island.

Environmental challenges

Although only one site, Aldabra Atoll, explicitly mentions challenges posed by the effects of climate change (e.g. in relation to rainfall patterns, coastal erosion, and sea level rise) and invasive species (which have already caused damage to fragile ecosystems), these factors are most certainly relevant to some degree at other network sites.

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These multifaceted challenges present opportunities for bilateral or multilateral collaboration among network sites, and the following section seeks to identify some areas of possible joint work.

Twining of sites through knowledge transfer
Sharing high value / low-impact eco-tourism experience
Environmental impact assessment (EIA) expertise
Disaster contingency planning
Illegal fishing interventions
Sustainable finance
Joint training / capacity-building initiatives

As a starting point for possible linkages among sites, one might examine conservation approaches in which a given site appears to have developed a certain level of proficiency, and to match that expertise to a need expressed at another site. For example, the Philippines' Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary mentions the dual challenges posed by "the absence of an effective community incentive programs to encourage community support and discourage turtle egg collection" and inadequate local government support for community-based conservation. Interestingly, while the Rufiji – Mafia Seascape apparently suffers from the same problem of "low government prioritisation of biodiversity conservation and protection", it has nonetheless managed to implement conservation activities through a community conservation officer network that has been active for the past 15 years. Perhaps there are some lessons from the Tanzanian model that could be applied in a Philippine context, through knowledge transfer.

Aldabra and iSimangaliso both depend on tourism as an important source of revenue, but both are experiencing declines in tourism due to factors largely beyond their control.

On the other hand, tourism expansion on Mafia Island is cited as an important challenge to be reckoned with. Sharing of experience and exploring this potential among network sites might stimulate new ideas. Other sites that appear to be less amenable to tourism activities (e.g. because of their remoteness, governance structure etc.) might nonetheless consider exploring the possibility of highly-specialised, high-value/low impact tourism as a means of providing revenue for conservation activities at the site.

The fact that several of the Network Sites have identified pressure of the development sector as an important challenge speaks to the need to examine the status of Environmental Impact Assessments for the surrounding areas – if only to investigate whether proper EIA's have been conducted with reference to the Network Site and mitigation measures put in place. One could look to other IOSEA countries with considerable expertise in this area, specifically related to development impacts on marine turtles (Australia being a good example).

Some of the sites express concern about their location relative to busy shipping lanes, and the risk of serious environmental damage in the event of a serious incident, such as an oil spill. This raises the basic question: What contingency plans are in place for dealing with a catastrophe in the vicinity of the Network Site? If this is something that has largely been overlooked, perhaps a collective brainstorming session would generate some pointed questions that need to be posed to the relevant authorities. A **report commissioned by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)** in 2013 highlights the scale

of the problem of accidents at sea. It might be useful to examine case studies of how other countries in the region have dealt with significant incidents of oil spillage. The example of the oil tanker which ran aground off the coast of Karachi, Pakistan, in 2003, spilling over 10,000 tons of crude oil into the sea, or the Montara oil spill which leaked an estimated 2,000 barrels a day into the Timor Sea for more than two months in 2009, may be instructive in this regard (if the remedial measures taken in the aftermath were properly documented).

Illegal fishing is a global concern and many of the Network Sites mention specific problems they face in this regard, particularly from individuals who come from other places to plunder local resources. To the extent that some countries may have been more effective than others in dealing with this intractable problem, perhaps an exchange of experience may generate ideas about approaches that are more or less effective.

Sustainable financing is another issue that would benefit from an exchange of ideas and approaches not only from within the Site Network, but also by examining conservation projects elsewhere in the region or around the globe that have successfully focussed on marine turtles as a flagship species. One could envisage a workshop that would bring together experts to share the theory that underpins some of these initiatives, as well as the practical lessons-learned from real-world examples.

Last, but definitely not least, most of the respondents identified specific areas of training and capacity-building that would benefit from international collaboration, notably:

- research design and standardised methodology (including, for example, that related to surveys);
- ecosystem monitoring (e.g. ecosystem health, population dynamics, climate change, measurement of other anthropogenic pressures);
- sustainable community incentive programmes (including community-managed ecotourism); and
- national strategy development.

The IOSEA Advisory Committee has been discussing for a number of years the most appropriate way of delivering technical support to member States, through a dedicated training programme that would take advantage of the considerable expertise that exists within the Advisory Committee and elsewhere. Perhaps a clearly-defined request for training from the Discussion Group would help to catalyse the funding and development of a comprehensive programme to meet the needs of these Network Sites.

Possible next steps:

1. The preceding analysis began with a concrete example of twinning two Network Sites, based on their shared interest in 'conservation through community engagement'. A more careful reading of all of the original Site Network proposals might provide further ideas to link other sites with common issues. Members are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the work of other Network Sites and to reflect on whether the know-how and experience gained at one site might usefully be transferred to another with similar challenges.

2. Where a number of Network Sites are seeking advice with regard to methodology and the planning/conduct of research, perhaps a first step would be to identify an Advisory Committee expert willing to undertake a programmatic evaluation of a particular site (or an even wider programme assessment) and to provide specific guidance on existing methodology and future research. Such an external evaluation might be accomplished through an IOSEA-facilitated mission. At the same time, aspects that would benefit from

more in-depth training could be identified.

3. Even more ambitious, one or more collective training workshops conducted under the auspices of the Advisory Committee could serve to build capacity in areas identified by Network Sites, and additional experts could be invited to address some of the other issues mentioned above, such as EIAs, contingency planning, and sustainable finance.

Perhaps one or more countries with Network Sites would be willing to host such a workshop, or series of workshops, facilitated by IOSEA through provision of resource persons.

4. Consideration should be given to exploring the possibility of securing funding for innovative work at individual Network Sites through the Small Grants Programme of the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Unlike larger-scale GEF projects which take a long time to develop, the SGP focuses on community-based initiatives and strives to streamline the decision-making process at country level. The GEF Small Grants Programme will be reviewed in the context of the Seventh Replenishment Period (July 2018 to June 2022) of the Trust Fund of the Global Environment Facility. Preliminary discussions about the so-called GEF-7 replenishment are already underway.

- Review detailed Site Network proposals for more shared interests
- Conduct, on request, expert evaluations of Network sites / programmes
- Organise common training workshops facilitated by IOSEA
- Explore the GEF Small Grants Programme

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