



Memorandum of Understanding on the  
Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and  
their Habitats of the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia

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## REPORT OF THE SECRETARIAT

### Recruitment of Signatory States

1. Since the Signatories last met in January 2012, Egypt and Sudan have joined the Memorandum of Understanding, with effect from 1 May 2014. This brings to 35 the total number of States participating in this agreement, concluded under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species. After more than a decade of existence, IOSEA has succeeded in bringing on board almost all of the key coastal States of the region. Somalia is the only country with a substantial coastline bordering the Indian Ocean that has yet to sign the MoU. While China, Japan and Republic of Korea have important fishing interests in the Indian Ocean, as well as marine turtle populations frequenting their waters, they have yet to show interest in joining the IOSEA MoU.

### Substantive activities undertaken

2. The following sections summarise some of the activities in which the Secretariat has been engaged over the past two and half years, a period which presented some extraordinary challenges. These include relocation and recovery of the IOSEA website in early 2012 (due to severe flooding in Bangkok and unrelated hacking events), disruption of normal working arrangements for more than a half-year, from late 2013 to mid-2014 (including temporary closure of the office) due to the instability in Thailand, as well as the departure and arrival of key personnel.

3. The substantive work of the Secretariat has been concentrated in five main areas: laying the groundwork for the formal launch of the IOSEA Network of Sites of Importance for Marine Turtles; maintaining and creating new online tools of value to managers and turtle practitioners; preparing and publishing various technical reports; overseeing ongoing technical support/capacity-building initiatives; and facilitating information exchange.

### *IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network*

4. Much of the activity in 2012 focused on tasks associated with the development of the IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network. A **dedicated webpage** was created to serve as a one-stop shop for all information related to the Site Network. The Evaluation Criteria that will be used to assess site nominations were carefully refined and re-circulated. The Secretariat solicited suggestions of potential candidate sites from members of the IOSEA Advisory Committee and other experts. This parallel exercise generated a list of about 80 potential candidate sites or areas in some 34 countries around the IOSEA region. Additionally, the Secretariat compiled Site Information Sheets (SIS) for about 20 of the suggested sites and transmitted the drafts to relevant Focal Points to encourage them to consider developing the proposals further. At the time of writing, it was still unclear how many of the proposals would eventually be taken forward in this round. Nonetheless, the contents of the draft SIS could eventually form the basis for future Site Network submissions.

### *Development of online tools*

5. Another focus of attention over the past year was the development of an online facility that allows users to report, search and analyse international flipper tag recoveries throughout the Indian Ocean – South-East Asia region. The idea grew from concern that while an enormous effort has been conducted across the region, over many decades, to apply flipper tags to hundreds of thousands of turtles, information on flipper tag returns has not been shared as widely and as efficiently as possible. A prototype of the **IOSEA International Flipper Tag Recovery Database** was completed with the support of an external consultant. So far, the database has been populated with information on tag recoveries from France and South Africa, as well as a few preliminary entries for Seychelles, Somalia, and United Republic of Tanzania. Intensive preparations for the SS7 meeting overtook plans to publicise the new database more widely and to solicit more contributions, but this activity will resume during and after the SS7 meeting. The first priority is to achieve as comprehensive coverage as possible for historical and current flipper tag recoveries in the Western Indian Ocean, before encouraging further contributions from the remaining IOSEA sub-regions. The database is fully integrated with the IOSEA List of Flipper Tag Series in Use in the Indian Ocean, making it easier than ever to identify the source of a particular tag. In the coming year, Focal Points and other partners will be encouraged to revisit their tag series and to update the details currently on display.

6. Other online tools have been continuously updated. The IOSEA **Satellite Tracking Metadatabase** has expanded to cover more than 220 projects conducted in about 30 countries of the IOSEA region (an increase of more than 60 projects since 2012). These projects have now collectively tracked nearly 1,400 individual turtles, an increase of more than 400 compared to January 2012. Overall, green turtles remain the most tracked species in the IOSEA region (525 animals), followed by loggerheads (250), flatbacks (240) and hawksbills (170), whereas leatherbacks (about 70) and olive ridleys (about 120) continue to be the least studied. Relatively fewer, but increasing numbers of juveniles (about 290) now figure in the database. Australia tops the chart in terms of the number of active projects, but smaller studies are also ongoing in the Northern, Northwest and Western Indian Ocean. Satellite tracking was the focus of a dedicated workshop at the Sixth Meeting of Signatory States, resulting in a number of useful recommendations that are worth revisiting.

7. The online **Bibliography Resource** has grown considerably over the past three years to include over 2000 English, French and Portuguese references relevant to marine turtle conservation, from 1907 to the present. Initially focusing on the Western Indian Ocean, the database was later expanded to also include hundreds of entries from countries of the Northern Indian Ocean. The Bibliography Resource is widely consulted and the Secretariat receives many requests for accessing individual papers, which are accepted only if they meet strict usage guidelines. Consideration may be given to extending the content of the Bibliography Resource to other IOSEA regions if there is interest and funding available.

8. The **Useful Contacts Database** has also grown, with more than 30 new contacts added last year from a compilation made for a synthesis on the socio-economic and cultural implications of marine turtle use and conservation. The Secretariat has commenced, but not yet completed, a project to review the websites of partner organisations and to encourage them to establish links to the IOSEA website where they do not already exist.

### *Official reports and technical publications*

9. The **official report** of the Sixth Meeting of Signatory States was circulated and also made available online in May 2012. A number of other important reports were finalised and published that year, among them a **Review of Marine Turtle Conservation in the Northern Indian Ocean** (by Dr. Jeff Miller, an activity funded under a cooperative activity with the BOBLME project); and an updated **Assessment of the Conservation Status of the Leatherback Turtle in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia** (published online) which was coordinated by Dr Ronel Nel.

10. In April 2013, the Secretariat published a **systematic analysis of national reports of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC)**, in order to assess their contribution to the understanding of marine turtle by-catch in the Indian Ocean and of the efficacy of by-catch mitigation measures undertaken by IOTC member States, many of which are also IOSEA Signatories.

11. A region-wide **Ecological Risk Assessment for Sea Turtles of the Indian Ocean**, compiled by a team also led by Dr. Ronel Nel, was updated with additional information and feedback from various reviewers. The document reviews marine turtle data for all six species of marine turtles found in the Indian Ocean. The exercise was an important first step in drawing attention to what is known and not known, and drawing inferences that are worthy of further investigation.

12. In September 2013, the **Assessment of the Conservation Status of the Loggerhead Turtle in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia**, compiled by IOSEA Advisory Committee member Dr. Mark Hamman and other co-workers, was published online; and a hard copy version was circulated in early 2014. The Assessment presents a synopsis of the current state of knowledge for the species in the IOSEA region, based on a review of information for six recognised Regional Management Units. The report includes many helpful recommendations for follow-up conservation action, which will be raised for discussion at the present meeting.

13. In February 2014, the Secretariat published a working draft of a substantial review of studies and activities that relate to the **socio-economic and cultural implications of marine turtle use and conservation in the IOSEA region**. The compilation of examples of public participation and stakeholder engagement in marine turtle conservation across the IOSEA region over the past two last decades responded to, and expands upon, a need that was initially identified by the Western Indian Ocean – Marine Turtle Taskforce (WIO-MTTF) and reiterated by the Sixth Meeting of IOSEA Signatory States. The synthesis is presented as Doc. 10.3.

#### ***IOSEA Technical Support / Capacity Building***

14. In March 2012, the first phase of the IOSEA Technical Support / Capacity Building Programme concluded successfully in Myanmar, with a **theoretical and field training course** delivered by IOSEA Advisory Committee member, Dr Colin Limpus. Later in the year, the Secretariat delivered some essential field monitoring equipment to the Department of Fisheries for use at 3 or 4 key field stations around the country.

15. A modest grant from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Marine Turtle Conservation Fund) was received in the latter part of 2013, allowing the programme to be extended into a second phase. Expressions of interest to receive technical assistance were solicited from a number of IOSEA Signatory States, but concrete project activities have yet to emerge from the discussions so far. The Secretariat has been in contact with Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, and Oman about possible assistance. These bilateral discussions are expected to continue during the present meeting.

16. In July 2013, Dr. Jeff Miller circulated to the Secretariat and the Advisory Committee a lengthy analysis, with recommendations, of the kinds of technical support and capacity-building that might be delivered to Signatory States within the framework of IOSEA. His analysis was based on an assessment of needs and improved delivery mechanisms, including ideas for consideration / feedback from the Advisory Committee. The findings will serve as a basis for Doc. 8: *Further development of the technical support/capacity-building programme*.

17. Also in 2013, the Secretariat was invited to participate in four conference calls of a steering committee that is overseeing the development of a national action plan for French overseas territories of the Southwest Indian Ocean (*PNA Tortues marines SOOI*). This participation allowed the Secretariat to specify which provisions of the IOSEA Conservation and Management Plan the various elements of the French plan are meant to address, and to suggest certain amendments aimed at clarifying the focus of some of the objectives and integrating them with existing IOSEA programmes and activities.

### *Facilitating information exchange*

18. One of the key functions of the Secretariat is to facilitate the exchange of information about marine turtle conservation activities within and, to a lesser extent, beyond the IOSEA region. Given its limited capacity, the most cost-effective means of disseminating information is via the IOSEA website ([www.ioseaturtles.org](http://www.ioseaturtles.org)). The website has functioned well and has not been substantially redesigned since undergoing a major overhaul in 2008. However, technology has evolved rapidly over the years and the platform on which the website is constructed is no longer up-to-date. Serious consideration needs to be given to upgrading the underlying code and taking advantage of that opportunity to freshen the site's appearance. Also, new ideas for attracting additional readership through enhanced use of social media tools should be explored. The amount of time involved in such a facelift of the website should not be underestimated. While the Secretariat has made an effort in recent years to include some website content in French, when it is available, it is beyond the Secretariat's capacity to translate existing material into other languages. However, the website does offer a built-in automated Google translation function for several widely used languages. Although the translations are far from perfect, they allow users without any English language capability to get the gist of some of the website content.

19. The 'e-News' continues to be sent out each and every month to a fixed subscriber list that now numbers 1000 individuals. The monthly newsletter contains a number of feature stories from the previous month, news from the Secretariat, and clickable links to headlines and other articles that readers may have missed if they are not frequent visitors to the website. This service continues to be well received, as evidenced by the increased number of website visits immediately after its circulation at the beginning of the month. There is also a noticeable spike in readership at the beginning of each week, suggesting that there may be a core group of users who visit the site on a weekly basis. The Secretariat is able to track all of these trends through a built-in web traffic analyser.

20. Attracting regular external content for the website remains a challenge, especially in the face of 'competition' from other newsletters that seek to tap into the same audience. Recently, the Secretariat has increased the use of links to other websites, which offers a cost-effective way of introducing fresh material to the website. We have also continued to highlight significant activities of relevance to marine turtle conservation in the IOSEA region through regular **Profiles of the Month** and feature articles. Particular attention has been given to showcasing the work of small NGOs that are making noteworthy contributions to marine turtle conservation. Important thematic topics and government initiatives have also been highlighted. Varied examples from the past couple of years include:

- Presentation of the work of the **Kenyan community-based LOT:WTW conservation project**, and of the **Tanzania-based NGO: Sea Sense**;
- A **case study from Tamil Nadu** on the institutional battle fought by a small group of conservationists to free nesting beaches from Casuarina plantations;
- A **précis of a remarkable century-old report on turtle exploitation and conservation in former Burma (Myanmar)**;
- A description of the novel **Community Voice Method (CVM)** for engaging stakeholders in discussions about natural resource use;
- Reflections on the CBD process to identify **ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs)**;
- Activities of the **Sea Turtle Conservation Center of the Royal Thai Navy**;
- Insights into **sea turtle conservation in the Republic of Korea**; and
- Marine turtle conservation activities undertaken by the **Ifremer – Indian Ocean Delegation**; and **European Union Purse Seine Fishery - Sea Turtle Interactions** in the Indian Ocean.

The Secretariat has also prepared a comprehensive ‘Year-End Review and Look-Ahead’ in each of the last two years, giving a unique perspective on regional developments.

21. The Online Projects Database now contains detailed descriptions of nearly 140 project activities in 29 countries around the region. The Secretariat has made a concerted effort to solicit and compile the information from a wide range of sources. Though there are likely many project activities still not included in the system, a very good start has already been made. Future attention should focus on requesting contributors to review and update their entries.

22. The Secretariat has at its disposal a range of information materials for public distribution, including a “*Sea Turtles – Our Ocean Ambassadors*” DVD produced in English and French, an informative brochure and colourful stickers. However, these have not been revised in many years and it is time to redesign and update the suite of information materials and/or consider whether alternative approaches might better serve the purpose of communicating the work that IOSEA is conducting.

### **Inter-agency cooperation and sub-regional coordination**

23. The Secretariat has continued to work cooperatively with a number of organisations in the region that are implicated directly or indirectly in marine turtle conservation. Linkages with the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) – which in April 2012 adopted a comprehensive resolution (12/04) on marine turtles – continue to be productive. The respective secretariats joined forces in 2012 to fund the preparation of the region-wide Ecological Risk Assessment (ERA) mentioned above, which was the subject of further work in 2013. The meeting of the IOTC Scientific Committee in 2013 demonstrated the high degree of relevance of that body’s deliberations and ongoing work to marine turtle conservation. The Coordinator’s active participation in the IOTC Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch (WPEB) has cemented IOSEA’s important role in maintaining a high profile for marine turtle concerns in that regional fisheries management body. One area of possible collaboration with IOTC, identified at the last WPEB meeting, is the addition of a marine turtle component to future training workshops on by-catch mitigation which have already been successfully organised in relation to seabirds. Another could be the revision and production of new identification cards for fishing fleets; and further expert contributions to the production of the annual IOTC “Executive summary” of marine turtle conservation status.

24. The Secretariat continued its long-lasting association with a regional programme that aimed to promote marine turtle research and conservation in South-East Asia, effectively coordinated by the Southeast Asia Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), based in Malaysia. The Coordinator has participated actively in several SEAFDEC workshops over the years, including the last Regional Meeting on Conservation and Management of Sea Turtle Foraging Habitats in Southeast Asian Waters, held in October 2013. The meeting served, among other things, to draft a regional plan of action focusing on foraging habitats and to discuss guidelines for future conduct of studies. The Kuala Lumpur workshop effectively concluded the regional project which had been supported for over a decade by a Japanese Trust Fund. The Malaysian SEAFDEC representative suggested that IOSEA might offer a forum for countries of the sub-region to continue their fruitful dialogue on marine turtles, a suggestion that would be warmly welcomed should the countries concerned wish to take advantage of the opportunity.

25. The Western Indian Ocean - Marine Turtle Task Force (MTTF), now chaired by Dr. Peter Richardson, helps to stimulate initiatives and dialogue in that sub-region. The Task Force is nominally a joint initiative of the Nairobi Convention and IOSEA, but its organisational and financial support has come mainly from IOSEA. The Task Force held its fourth meeting in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in December 2012. Much of the workshop focused on reviewing species and other site-based information contained in IOSEA national reports in order to identify candidate sites for potential inclusion in the IOSEA Site Network. The report of the workshop was published online in May 2013. Additionally, a well-attended side-meeting organised in the margins of the biennial WIOMSA symposium held in Maputo, Mozambique, in November 2013, attracted several MTTF members.

26. Unfortunately, the Secretariat has lacked the capacity to further develop a partnership forged with the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project in 2010-11, through which IOSEA received a small grant to improve the state of knowledge of marine turtle conservation efforts in the eight countries of the BOBLME region. The BOBLME project is expected to be extended through mid-2015.

## **Meetings**

27. The Coordinator has attempted throughout the reporting period to attend marine turtle meetings relevant to the work of IOSEA. In 2012-13 these included the 33rd Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation, meetings of the IOTC Scientific Committee and WPEB, SEAFDEC, BOBLME, WIOMSA Scientific Symposium, and a CBD/EBSA workshop. In March 2014, the Coordinator attended a workshop organised by the Emirates Wildlife Society-WWF which concluded an intensive three-year hawksbill satellite tracking project, and he took advantage of the opportunity to hold a special half-day session to brief participants on developments with the IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network. In June 2014, a regional workshop of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) provided a platform to bring participants from the Northern Indian Ocean sub-region up to speed on IOSEA developments.

28. Considerable time was invested during 2012, 2013 and even 2014 on efforts to try to secure a host Government for the present Meeting of the Signatory States. These efforts were ultimately not successful and it was therefore decided to hold the meeting in Thailand. Instability in Bangkok around the time a final decision had to be made about whether to proceed with a meeting in or around the capital prompted a reassessment of the situation. In consultation with the Executive Secretary of CMS, it was agreed that shifting the meeting to Bonn, Germany, the seat of the parent Convention, would remove any uncertainty about the prospects of organising a successful meeting. In general, the amount of Secretariat time that has to be devoted to discussions and negotiations about a possible host country for the meeting should not be underestimated. Signatory States could relieve much of the burden by coming forward with concrete offers to host the next meeting, preferably already during the present session. Document Inf.9 lists the indicative requirements for hosting an IOSEA meeting.

## **Administrative and financial matters**

29. Since its inception the Secretariat has been co-located with the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (UNEP/ROAP) in the United Nations building in Bangkok. Beginning in 2012, ROAP began to charge a reasonable fee for office space and basic services (telephone, internet etc.) which has been reflected in the Secretariat's budget estimate. The administrative arrangements continue to run smoothly and the support received from both UNEP/ROAP and ESCAP in relation to administrative issues has been conducive to a productive work environment. As of July 2014, a number of administrative services, including as payroll, were transferred from ESCAP to UNON in Nairobi, and it is hoped that the new arrangement will be implemented seamlessly. Further information on financial and administrative matters is given in Doc. 11.

30. The Secretariat continues to be staffed by one professional officer, about 15 percent of whose time is spent as Senior Advisor to the Convention on Migratory Species. The Coordinator's advisory work on behalf of CMS has generally been in areas far removed from marine turtle conservation; and is more often related to migratory bird conservation in Asia. However, one occasionally finds parallels and commonality of approaches that are transferrable from one field to another, with potential benefit for IOSEA work.

31. In March 2013, the Team Assistant Patcharin Supitchakul moved to another position in the regional UNEP office while continuing to help for a short time with the updating of the IOSEA website. An attempt to recruit a replacement was abandoned because of a dearth of suitable candidates and difficulties in attracting qualified staff to a position without guaranteed funding (as a consequence of IOSEA's voluntary funding arrangement). An effective compromise was reached by

engaging a consultant who has assisted with a wide range of technical and substantive work, while the Secretariat continues to receive in-kind support from UNEP/ROAP for basic administrative functions. The Secretariat has also benefited from a number of internships and could have accommodated more in 2013-14 if the situation in Bangkok had been more stable.

32. Financial and administrative matters are covered in depth in the paper mentioned above, but it is appropriate to mention here the investment of Secretariat time in encouraging voluntary contributions towards IOSEA operational costs, as well as the preparation of grants for specific activities. Indeed, the voluntary, non-binding nature of the IOSEA agreement requires expenditure of effort to pursue contributions that might otherwise be more readily forthcoming through a binding instrument. An appropriate balance has to be found between that necessary activity and devotion of energy to other substantive work. Fortunately, a core group of consistent Signatory State contributors to the IOSEA MoU have made that task easier than it might otherwise have been over the past decade.

33. The Secretariat wishes to acknowledge the continuing voluntary contributions from IOSEA Signatory States, as well as facilities and services provided by the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in Bangkok – without which all of this work would not be possible. From 2012 to 2014, generous financial support received from the Governments of Australia, France, India, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, South Africa, Thailand, United Kingdom and United Republic of Tanzania, and United States has helped to sustain IOSEA operations and activities throughout the reporting period.

### **Work programme for the year ahead**

34. The work programme of the Secretariat will be shaped by the outcomes of the present meeting, and will depend on the decisions taken with respect to a number of agenda items. However, some core activities can already be identified which will continue to demand attention, notably:

- Promoting and facilitating the establishment of sub-regional co-ordination mechanisms where these do not already exist, through increased contact with selected intergovernmental bodies;
- Developing closer linkages with selected non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations, particularly those whose activities span several countries in the region;
- Reinforcing ties with regional fisheries bodies that have a critical role to play in managing marine turtle by-catch;
- Immediate follow-up arising from the launch of the IOSEA Marine Turtle Site Network, particularly in relation to Signatory States with newly listed sites;
- Ongoing maintenance and further development of the IOSEA website, including newly created tools such as the International Flipper Tag Database; and
- Overseeing timely implementation of a number of new projects arising from recommendations contained in recent species assessments and technical support/capacity building requests.

### ***Action requested / expected outcome:***

Signatory States are invited to note the report of the Secretariat, to seek any clarification that might be necessary, and to reflect on any additional activities that may warrant inclusion in the Secretariat's work programme over the coming year, subject to there being sufficient resources for implementation.