



Conservation of the population of the bottlenose dolphin and the loggerhead turtles and identifying protected areas for them



INTRODUCTION

The LIFE + Migrate Project (LIFE11 NAT/MT/1070) aims at carrying out studies on the status of the population of the loggerhead turtle (il-fekruna tal-baħar) and of the bottlenose dolphin (id-delfin ta' geddumu qasir) in Maltese waters. With a budget of nearly of 1 million Euros, 50% of which will be co-financed by the EU LIFE + Fund, this project commenced on the 1st October 2012 and is envisaged to run till April 2016.

Project Goals

Loggerhead turtles and bottlenose dolphins are protected by the EU legislation (the EC Habitats Directive- 92/43/EEC) as well as numerous other multilateral agreements (regional and international conventions) to

which Malta is a party. In order to adequately protect these species, we first have to understand their status and gather knowledge on the type of habitat that may be essential for them, so that we can also

protect their habitats, if they are present in Malta.

At present, there is a lack of comprehensive information and specific data regarding these species as well as any essential habitats that may be present in Malta; the project aims to try to close these knowledge gaps as much as possible, so as to find out more about the conservation status of the population and any important areas for the continuation of their life cycle. The project should lead to the identification of areas such as potential feeding grounds or important migratory routes, if these are found to be present in Malta, and the eventual protection of such important sites.

More specifically the targets of this project are:

- To assess the Conservation Status of *Tursiops truncatus* and *Caretta caretta* and create baselines for the assessment of trends through desk top studies which may lead to identification/the consideration of potential hotspots through the use of GIS;
- To verify these areas identified as potential hotspots, through the use of boat-based observations, which will be carried out periodically. Apart from the official boat-based survey to be carried out by our Spanish partners (who have carried out similar work in Spain), the project also aims to involve interested stakeholders; fishermen, leisure-craft owners, etc..., on a voluntary basis;
- Interested volunteers will be provided with training in order to allow them to record sightings effectively. Such boat-based observations coming from the public and other entities involved will help to gather more data, but also to

market the project and increase its visibility & awareness with the general public ;

Alongside with the main actions, the project aims to carry out awareness-raising and education efforts through the use of the project website and a quarterly electronic newsletter, as well as other information material including brochures, roll-up banners and a short video. The project website will be regularly updated to ensure that interested parties are kept abreast of the developments of the project. The electronic newsletter will serve to disseminate particularly significant progress achieved, and the brochures and short video will contain more general information about the project. The project will also aim to feature on popular TV programmes, radio programmes, in newspapers and magazines.

Although the main target species of this project are those mentioned above, any other important marine species which will be encountered through out the project will also be recorded.

Area coverage for this project

The envisaged area for this project extends to the Fisheries Management Zone (FMZ), which extends up to the 25 nautical mile. The territorial waters of Malta are up to the 12 nautical miles and include smaller zones protected as artificial reefs, conservation areas around wrecks, marine protected areas like SACs and SPAs- like the Rđum Majjiesa area & the sea around Filfla.

Partners

For this project, MEPA has partnered up with KAI Marine Services (Spain), and the Ministry for Environment

Associated beneficiaries

KAI Marine Services

KAI Marine Services (the Spanish Partners mentioned above), which have extensive expertise on these specific studies, have worked in Spanish waters, where they assisted in the identification of crucial areas for these and other marine species.

KAI Marine have an international, interdisciplinary team with over 10 years of experience in the development of LIFE Nature projects, setting protocols and standards for the monitoring of

conservation status of protected species, primarily cetaceans (dolphin, whales and porpoises) and marine turtles, and contributing actively in international, regional and European biodiversity frameworks.

Co-Financiers

Bank of Valletta is co-financing this project and is supporting it as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility environmental programmes.

INFORMATION

The Loggerhead Turtle

Scientific Name: *Caretta caretta*;

Malti: il-fekruna tal-baħar



The loggerhead turtle is present in all oceans and is the most abundant species in the Mediterranean. The main nesting beaches are in Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Tunisia and Libya.

Loggerheads with an average weight of 90-150 kg have a reddish-grey oval shell (carapace) of an average length of 90-100 cm, with dented edges and a yellow coloured plastron (underside). The large

robust head gives it its common English name.

The species feeds mainly on crustaceans (crabs and the like) sponges, molluscs and other invertebrates and mature at the age of 30-35 years with mature males possessing a longer tail and claw-shaped nails on the front flippers to be able to hold on the female during mating.

Loggerheads mate in the sea and lay their eggs in sandy beaches, generally on the same beach where they were born. Eggs and hatchlings are predated upon by all sorts of animals, but get less susceptible as they get bigger. The survival rate to the adult phase is very low, estimated as 1 %.

Loggerheads carry out complex migrations across different marine habitats and territories. Juveniles and sub-adults have an open sea habit, several miles away from the coast, whilst they acquire a more coastal habit during the adult phase. The western Mediterranean is a feeding area where thousands of juvenile and sub-adult

loggerhead sea turtles occur during the summer months.

Loggerhead turtles are protected by local and international legislation and the Mediterranean population is considered as threatened.

The Bottlenose Dolphin

Scientific Name: *Tursiops truncatus*;

Malti: id-delfin ta' geddumu qasir



This species, probably the best known of all the dolphins is found throughout most seas and oceans. In the Mediterranean its distribution appears fragmented into small units in coastal and offshore waters.

In coastal areas, bottlenose dolphins normally live in small groups of about 7 individuals, however offshore pods may consist of hundreds of individuals (though commonly 15-25). They are playful and sociable animals, jumping and riding waves and interacting with humans, often following vessels. In the Mediterranean, they feed mainly on bottom feeding fish.

These animals range from 2.8m to 4m in size, with males being larger than females. They are generally grey in colour, darker on the dorsal side and with a lighter underside. The snout, normally short, is well-separated from the rest of the head; the feature which gave it its common name.

Males generally reach sexual maturity at 11 years and females at 12, giving birth to a calf every two years (with a gestation period of 11-12 months). The calf is generally weaned for 12-18 months.

Bottlenose dolphins are protected by local and international legislation, and the Mediterranean population is reported as vulnerable due to impact with fishing gear and habitat loss (including over fishing of its prey species).

SIGHTINGS

Sightings of the dolphins / Whale / Loggerhead Turtle

A number of sightings have been reported during the past 5 months in the Maltese waters.

Bottlenose dolphins have been spotted and communicated to us at least on two occasions, one during the month of October 2012, late in the evening at around 2100 hrs and another one recently on the 11th March, 2013 at around 1600 hrs. One animal was seen at the Strand, Tas-Sliema between the ferries and Manoel Island and the other one near the breakwater below Fort St. Elmo, close to Bighi Bay. Reports on these two occasions were delivered by a member of the general public and a reporter of 'The Times of Malta' respectively.

Sightings of whales have also been reported at least on four occasions. On 2 consecutive occasions, when the same whale of a length of about 11 metres, greyish blue in colour was spotted diving by the AFM (Armed Forces of Malta). The sea was calm and the whale was seen in the vicinities of the Grand Harbour, and later off Rinella on the 26th December 2012. The whale was seen twice in a span of approx 15 mins between 9.27 am and 9.45 am. From the description of this sighting which MEPA followed afterwards, it is probable that the whale in question was a fin whale which is the largest whale in the Mediterranean.

Another 2 consecutive sighting of possibly another fin whale was communicated to us again by AFM, on the 3rd April who got the call from a fishermen whilst out at sea near Filfla. After talking directly to the very helpful fishermen, it was stipulated that again the whale in question was a fin whale of about 11-12 metres in length. On the next day, we got information both from the public and from a senior environment officer who works at MEPA and who was in Ħad Dingli. They had also sighted this same whale from land. It was actually seen spraying water from its blow hole whilst at the surface.

AFM have also reported sightings and in fact landed two loggerhead turtles which were found in difficulty on the 6th October 2012 and on the 12th October. The loggerhead, later called Aretha by the person who sighted it first, weighs about 48 kilos and was seen in Dwejra whilst another one named Aladeen weighing 17.9 kilos was spotted in Gnejna Bay. During the same month, on the 16th, Jerry (as named later by them) weighing 16.8 kilos was spotted by Birdlife Malta roaming around Filfla.

The general public is invited to report any sightings of these species and/or any other species observed at sea on: info@lifeprojectmigrate.com and/or call on 99210404

