

**PRELIMINARY DATA ON STRANDED AND ON LANDED ACCIDENTALLY
CAUGHT LOGGERHEAD TURTLES IN MALTA**

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SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

Loggerhead turtles are relatively common in Malta and accidentally caught in significant numbers too, in particular in long line fisheries. Some fisherman, occasionally, land such accidentally caught turtles. These are then transferred to the recently available holding and rehabilitation facility at the Malta Centre for Fisheries Sciences at Torri San Lucjan, M'xlokk of the Fisheries Conservation and Control Division (FCCD). Most of these are eventually released after treatment and rehabilitation.

The database compiled from this incoming data, gives us indications of mortality numbers, numbers released and also hint at growth rates, thus helping to direct conservation efforts.

The Nature Protection Unit (NPU) together with the FCCD, started its tagging programme in 1991, through the assistance of the Regional Activity Center for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA – UNEP/MAP) which also provided the tags.

Data is presented on the status of the loggerhead turtles in the Maltese Islands, and the first local attempt to describe the success rates of the initial endeavours of turtle rehabilitation. The incidence of landings of such injured specimens increased as a result of awareness campaigns aimed at fishermen.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected by the authors as from 1991, with a gap between 1991 and 1997, during which no rehabilitation measures were as yet available, hence most turtles were released immediately. Dead specimens were sometimes stored in freezers for later examinations, post mortems and/or for sampling, some of them were buried for later extraction of the skeleton to be given to the Maltese Natural history Museum; All the live stranded or accidentally caught specimens were actually taken to the FCCD where they were taken care of and subsequently tagged just prior to release; those turtles which were not to be released were not tagged.

RESULTS

Out of more than 50 turtles landed in the period from 2002-2004, 10 turtles died [~20%], some after a few days at the center, with an occasional incidence of post-operative death. Only 3-4 turtles died post an operation. Most of the turtles which died were either brought by fisherman in an advanced comatose stage or had several traumatic lesions probably caused by a propeller. Others may have died due to severe infections following the swallowing of hooks and complications in the gut (as showed by some postmortems).

An interesting event was the landing of a loggerhead turtle on the 15th October, 2002, which was in difficulty near Comino possibly because of some entanglement in nylon, although a number of long line hooks (as confirmed by an operation) were also later extracted; This turtle was quite particular in that it had 4 costal scutes on its carapace. This turtle was operated upon, on the 25th January 2003, but died some 20 days afterwards.

Thirty-two turtles were tagged and twenty eight turtles were released between 2002 and 2004 in two mass releases. 4 other individuals were released in single events prior to 2002.

The common seasons when fishermen mostly land turtles seem to be between June and October, whilst in December - February some fishermen fishing for swordfish also land a number of turtles.

Most of the landed turtles in January - March actually turtles entangled in drift nets or in pieces of nylon, or are hit by propellers (and for one turtle, the case was of disorientation in the output piping system of the reverse osmosis plants).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The majority of specimens stranded or landed were actually juveniles, measuring less than 60 cm (CCL), however fishermen may be less reluctant to land bigger turtles and thus this data needs to be taken with caution.

Although tagging started in 1991, more frequent tagging was carried out after 2001, subsequent to some formal and informal campaigns carried out amongst fishermen by FCCD and amongst the general public by NPU, through the first mass release of turtles. This followed the setting up of the rehabilitation centre.

Although there is an occasional incidence of post-operative death, and though a few turtles which due to severe physical handicaps, have limit swimming abilities and have to remain at the centre, the incidence of rehabilitating turtles is quite good.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are particularly grateful to dedicated personnel at the MCFS caring for the turtles at the centre and in particular to Mr. Charles Sammut. We would also like to show our appreciation to all officials who work at the Nature Protection Unit of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and to volunteers within the NGO Nature Trust, for the care and attention they give to stranded marine turtles.

The first author is also indebted to the assistance of John Borg and Dimitris Margaritoulis for their interest and transmittal of numerous publications.