Saw a turtle or a dolphin? Please contact us

Summer is indisputably the best time for people to go around with their boats or enjoy a ride with friends who own a boat. Malta, being surrounded completely by the sea, harbours a considerable number of sea enthusiasts, all of who take to their yacht, boat, cabin cruiser or a rented vessel during this season.

The summer months are also the ones when one is most likely to encounter whales, dolphins and marine turtles whilst out at sea. If you do encounter any of these spectacular creatures, we kindly ask you to take note of important details like coordinates, date and time. This data is extremely valuable to us. It will enable us to be in a better position to plan how to conserve these species.

In our website, one can easily record a sighting by entering the details in the following link: *http://lifeprojectmigrate.com/category/info-volunteers/*. Alternatively, one can also fill in the sighting form (Please click on the links below to download the relevant sighting forms). The forms will tell you which information to collect for each respective species. Alternatively, you may send us an email on *lifeprojectmigrate@mepa.org.mt* or call us on +356 9921 0404, +356 2290 7103 or +356 229 7237.

- **Sea turtle sighting form**:

  http://lifeprojectmigrate.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Turtle-sightings-for-volunteers-2013.pdf

- **Cetacean sighting form:**

  http://lifeprojectmigrate.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Cetacean-sightings-for-volunteers-2013.pdf

Let's do it!

"Let's do it!" also known by its acronym as "LDI" is a civic-led mass movement that aims to clean up the whole world from illegally dumped solid waste and to thus keep our planet clean. We are all aware that life in the Mediterranean Sea is seriously threatened. One of the main

causes is the increase in marine and coastal litter. Therefore movements such as LDI can greatly contribute to effectively minimise this threat and better protect our environment. This is an international movement, thus we also seek international and regional cooperation in order to better protect the sea, its resources and the marine environment, since such cooperation can guarantee better conservation.

An informative session about the LIFE + Migrate project and the threats that marine litter poses to the marine creatures under study was given to the divers present for the underwater clean up at the "Let's do it Malta" in Wied iz-Zurrieq on the 9th of May 2015. The significance of their action vis-à-vis the conservation of the marine species was also discussed. One major threat discussed was plastic, a non-degradable material which harms organisms both directly and indirectly and may even cause fatalities.

On the 29th of May 2015, the LIFE+ Migrate project was further promoted during a conference hosted by the LDI, whereby a formal presentation on the threats posed by marine litter and its effects on marine life was given. Even though, in all probability, it will be impossible to remove all marine litter, such collaborations help to raise more awareness among the public. This should have a positive impact in reducing the source of marine litter – the more awareness generated, the less likely that people will continue in their careless ways.

The Risso's dolphin: Not so rare after all

The Risso's dolphin is one of the largest species of dolphin. It can reach up to 4 meters in size and is easily identified by the body scarring appearance caused by interactions within the population. It can also be identified by a bulging (bulbous) head, and the absence of the typical beak (snout) found commonly in other dolphins. Its behaviour is typical of all dolphin species, i.e. it is known to breach, spy-hop[1] and bowride. Although many pods are shy and do not allow close approach, in 2013 a number of swimmers in Paradise Bay described an extremely friendly encounter with a pod of approximately six individuals.

More information about the Risso's Dolphin can be found in the 5th issue of this quaternary newsletter, issued through the LIFE+ Migrate project. This newsletter can be found at: *http://lifeprojectmigrate.com/life-migrate-newsletter_no5/*.

The objective of this article is to correct some misinformation about the scarcity of this species in the Mediterranean and in Maltese waters recently reported on local media on the 8th July 2015. The media reported that for the past 18 years since 1997, nobody has sighted such a

[1] A vertical half-rise out of the water performed by a whale in order to view the surroundings.

dolphin in Maltese waters. This is however not the case as over these years there were a number of sightings and standings for this particular dolphin.

For instance, there are stranding records for April 1996, March1997, Dec 1998, 2004, 2005 and 2008. Some of these standings were live ones, like for the one in 1997 at Marsaxlokk and the case of the young Risso's dolphin refloated successfully by NTM in 1998. Moreover, in 2013, the Times of Malta reported a sighting of a pod of Risso's dolphins observed around Paradise Bay in the North of Malta by swimmers. They were described as extremely friendly, coming right up to a boat and even allowing some people to swim with them.

The Risso's Dolphin was also one of the cetacean species observed during the boat based surveys conducted as part of this project (LIFE + MIGRATE) by KAI in summer 2013.

In addition to this, Notarbartolo di Sciara and Birkun Jr (2010) report that this species are present throughout the entire Mediterranean Sea, where the species' preferred habitat occurs. Notarbartolo di Sciara and Birkun Jr (2010) continue to reckon that there are higher concentrations of these species in the Northern Alboran Sea and Ligurian-Corso-Provencal basin. On the other hand, there are less frequent encounter of these species along the northern part of the West Mediterranean, Balearic, Ionian and western Aegean seas.

We trust this newsletter helps to clarify any misconceptions about the previously mentioned assertations regarding the presence of this species in Maltese waters. .

The interesting case of leatherback turtle found at Cirkewwa

The leatherback turtle is the largest sea turtle species, and amongst the heaviest modern reptiles found across the globe. It can grow up to 900 kegs, and is considered to be quite rare. Its colours range from black to very dark brown, often with pink or white splotches. The carapace, which is the hard upper shell, is elongated with seven narrow ridges probably aiding in swimming efficiency. Apart form the size, another distinguishable feature is the skin covering (hence its name) and oily flesh categorising this species as a family in its own right. The leatherback turtle has no claws on its flippers which are more elongated and paddle-like than in other sea turtles. This species can tolerate very cold waters mainly due to its thermoregulatory adaptations. It feeds exclusively on jellyfish and jelly- like creatures.

This species, *Dermochelys coriacæ,* is not commonly seen in the Mediterranean seas. The last confirmed sighting dates back decades, when it was seen and recorded for at least 12 times in the period 1970-1980 as detailed by Lanfranco in 1983. The leatherbacks that come in the Mediterranean are from the Atlantic Ocean sub-population and this species has been protected in Malta since 1992. Even though their distribution is wide, their numbers have declined globally. Thus this species is considered to be vulnerable[2].

However, there have been a number of recent notifications regarding this rare species. On Thursday 16th July at 6.30am, the Environment Protection Directorate was informed that a dead sea-turtle had been towed in Cirkewwa quay. The dead turtle had apparently first been noticed out at sea in the Comino Channel the previous evening. Once MEPA and other Government officials went on site on Thursday morning, it was confirmed that the specimen was a leatherback turtle. The dead specimen had a carapace of about 1.5m by 1.3m, and was nearly 2m long from head to tail.

Veterinary Division officials were also present on site, and conducted a necropsy[3] prior to the carcass being incinerated. Samples were taken by the University of Malta, and by the Veterinary Services Division for further analysis. The probable cause of death was an infection in the intestines which caused liver malfunctions, followed by further secondary infections in the lungs. Plastic was found in the intestines; this probably triggered the massive infection in the intestines. It was also estimated that the turtle had been dead for a number of days prior to its discovery. Nature Trust members were also present and assisted throughout the operation.

We trust that this article helps in raising more awareness about the importance of responsible waste disposal. Similar anthropogenic effects should be avoided, since this does not only interfere greatly with biodiversity and the entire ecosystem, but it also deprives us from enjoying fascinating creatures such as the leatherback turtle swimming freely in the sea.

[2] Please refer to the following link: *http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/6494/0*.

[3] An autopsy for animals.

Reference

- Notarbartolo di Sciara, G. & Birkun, A. Jr. (2010). Conserving whales, dolphins and porpoises in the Mediterranean and Black Seas: an ACCOBAMS status report, 2010. ACCOBAMS, Monaco, 212 pp.