

Project Update: November 2012

With the nesting season kicking off in Mozambique, the team are eagerly awaiting reports of the first nesting turtles along our stretch of the coast, since nesting activity in the south is well underway. As turtles migrate into the coastal areas, to begin the mating and nesting process, it is expected that this may be when poaching rates are at their highest. With this in mind, a Marine Megafauna Foundation 'Team Turtle' formed, led by Jess Williams with Simon Pierce, Lauren Warnell and Gabriel Marime made a trip down to Zavora, a small beachside town, 80 km further south down the coast from our research base at Tofo.

We met with local researchers from Association of Coastal Conservation of Mozambique (ACCM), Yara Tibirica, Sarah Bruck and dive operator, Juan Vega, who talked us through the latest updates on unsustainable fishing occurring in the area. They described how fishers had been setting drift nets in the tidal pools and shallows and had been catching many juvenile species, such as reef and nurse sharks. They also all emphasised how detrimental the fishing practice was to the local mobula or devil ray populations.

The Zavora researchers had not seen any recent sea turtle nesting activity along their stretch of the coast and were not sure how much poaching was occurring. They were confident that poaching was occurring in the area, however they thought that the fishers were cutting up the sea turtles out at sea and throwing the carapace overboard, to disguise any evidence, rather than bringing the animals ashore and discarding the turtle's shell in the sand dunes.

We decided to walk over two days an 8 km transect of the sand dunes from Zavora Lodge to the south, to check the primary and secondary dunes for any evidence of turtle poaching or evidence of the scale of spear fishers operating along this section of the coast. Along the transect we found the remains of three poached turtles. All were complete carapaces of adult sea turtles (two greens and one loggerhead) and were found within close proximity to the main fishing hub. This is an area of the coast where boats are left in the sand dunes and the fishers use the natural protection created by a prominent reef structure to launch their wooden boats and swim out for spear fishing in the calmer waters.

We also found evidence of temporary spear fishing camps in the area, however there were no indicators of fresh fishing from these camps. The weather had been particularly rough during our 2 day trip down to Zavora (and proceeding), with strong winds and very large swells prohibiting scuba diving activity and any fishing. Due to the aspect of Zavora's coastline, the swells that hit the beach are much larger and more frequent than those that come up to Tofo. It is possible the inclement weather works in our favour to minimise the number of days suitable to spear fish and launch wooden oar boats, thus minimising the opportunities for fishers to encounter a turtle and poach it.

We will attempt to visit Zavora frequently to conduct this same transect to compare poaching rates over the next few months. In addition, Gabriel, our Mozambican team member, was busy meeting with fishers, in particular Joao an ex-turtle poacher from the Tofo area who now works in the hospitality industry and is currently completing his PADI rescue diver qualification. Gabriel sat with the fishers to interview them about the extent of

their fishing activities, techniques they use, areas they frequent and their motivations behind fishing and their attitudes towards switching to sustainable fishing practices or seeking alternative livelihood options. As fishing for turtles is illegal in Mozambique interviewing fishers about this topic can be quite a sensitive issue. It takes numerous trips and visits to the area to meet with fishers for Gabriel to build up enough trust for the fishers to feel comfortable discussing the topic. Gabriel is an essential team member for us and we are slowly uncovering more and more information about the artisanal fishing communities along this part of the coast.

The interviews have a strong turtle focus but we recognise that turtle poaching is most likely related too much larger issues, such as low fish stocks, food availability and poverty. We have also uncovered much more information about how integrated the conservation for marine species must be, as our interviews have revealed information about catching manta rays and a variety of shark species for meat, fins and gill rakers. These behaviours are increasing along the Mozambican coast where the demand from Asia encourages these unsustainable fishing practices to be adopted, as they are the most profitable for fishers. Also worrying is a new fishery we have just uncovered, the trading of seahorses. We have a lot more work to do and have many more trips planned for the upcoming months so we hope to collect more information along the way to reveal the true situation occurring along the Inhambane Province.

