



Moving Mozambique's sea turtles off the dinner menu

Using World Turtle Day as a tool to deliver critical education and outreach programs.

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Convincing local communities, particularly those relying on coastal resources as a source of sustenance, that instead of harvesting or hunting they should conserve sea turtles, is a very difficult task.

In Mozambique, five species of sea turtles utilize its coastal waters and beaches for foraging and nesting. Of the 2 700 km of the country's coastline, parts teem with fish life and sea turtles are numerous. However in other parts, particularly Inhambane Province, this is not the case.

I have found it a difficult task to convince local Mozambican communities of a few key facts; that sea turtles are an important part of the marine environment, providing many different ecosystem services and thus contributing towards a healthy, diverse and resilient ecosystem. Secondly, that if protected, these charismatic species could help strengthen the local economy by providing an alternative source of livelihood to coastal families through the eco-tourism industry.

However, establishing tangible links between increased livelihoods by conserving sea turtles is a challenging idea to deliver to Mozambique's fishing community. Furthermore, sea turtle meat is still a regular item on the menu in Mozambican households and, apart from those with the skills to free-dive and spearfish, the majority of the

country's population has never seen a sea turtle alive, which further inhibits efforts. So even though sea turtles are all protected under national law, poaching is widespread and education and outreach campaigns are critical to connect, inspire and inform Mozambicans so they will work towards preserving their sea turtles.

This is why on May 23rd, 2013, I decided to launch the first World Turtle Day festivities for Tofo Beach, Inhambane. World Turtle Day presents the perfect opportunity to engage the local community and increase their knowledge of sea turtles and the threats turtles face. The day was packed full of turtle themed events to stimulate and engage the children in as many ways as possible.

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Here is my review of the day's events:

There were over 100 participants, ranging from 5 to 13 years old and from across three different schools, from the Tofo-Inhambane area. The day's events were led by Marine Megafauna Foundation along with combined teams from Eyes on the Horizon and All Out Africa.

The events were split into two sessions, the first of which involved 63 children eagerly awaiting the project leaders who were dressed as turtles with cardboard shells and face paint, on the beach that morning. The children, who were dressed in green and had made paper turtle hats and masks, spontaneously started chanting "Tar-tar-uga, Tar-tar-uga" (turtle, turtle!) at the top of their lungs, over and over again.

The children were divided into five groups and sea turtle shaped sand castles were built, each representing the different types of turtles found here. Even through the language barriers, (as most of the smaller children speak 'Bitonga' a local dialect and are just beginning to learn Portuguese) magnificent teamwork was displayed during the construction of the turtle castles.

After the turtle castles were completed, everyone gathered together to participate in sea turtle crawling races. This involved everyone lying on their stomachs at the starting line and using their arms and legs in a motion to represent how nesting sea turtles use their flippers to haul themselves up the beach to lay their eggs.

This activity was not only hilarious to all participants and onlookers, but also drew the attention of nearby tourists, local fishers and sellers in the market.



Conservation



Following the fun held on Tofo's main beach, the group eagerly gathered for a short talk and presentation about sea turtles. The talk, presented by myself, and translated into Portuguese by Messias Antonio (from All Out Africa), explained to the children that turtles live for a long time and are important providers of ecosystem services helping to maintain balanced and healthy oceans.

Key messages delivered to the children also included ways they can help conserve sea turtles, for example by recycling and using reusable bags rather than plastic.

A short documentary about the success of sea turtle conservation initiatives in Brazil was then screened. Unlike Brazil which, has successfully preserved the majority of its sea turtles, Mozambique is still struggling to achieve this

goal. Many local children here have never seen a sea turtle nesting and will not see one in the water as most do not have the opportunity to learn to swim, let alone scuba dive. This is why visual stimulus of sea turtles and people working with turtles to protect them is the key to helping these children engage and connect with the ideas presented, so that in the future they may become sea turtle guardians or stewards.

To finalize the morning’s events each child was given a turtle shaped cookie as a small gift for participating in our first World Turtle Day celebrations.

In the afternoon, the team (still dressed as turtles), walked to Escola Pembane, a local school approximately one hour away by foot on the northern end of the marshland, which backs onto Tofo’s main settlement. At Pembane, we worked with a class of 42 Mozambican children to deliver a turtle themed arts lesson.

We were joined by a team of enthusiastic marine and social project volunteers from All Out Africa, who had gone above and beyond in their efforts to dress as turtle similar to those of a popular cartoon involving ninjas!

Before commencing the painting and colouring, Messias and I spoke to the class once again, about the importance of turtles and how they are protected under Mozambican law. When asked, “who has eaten turtle before?” two-thirds of the class raised their hands.



The turtle craft activities could not have been aimed at a more critical target audience. The children coloured and decorated paper turtle cutouts and painted the humps on egg cartons to represent the shells of turtles. These were then strung up, to make hanging ornaments. The activity was well received and all participants seemed very grateful to be learning both about the turtles and having the opportunity for an art lesson, with materials they do not normally have access to.

Further afield than Tofo, dozens of other children across Southern Africa participated in World Turtle Day celebrations through a collaboration between the Cape Town and Swaziland project coordinators from All Out Africa to help deliver World Turtle Day to a wider audience. It's a combination of awareness and knowledge that is key to invoking a change in the human behaviours that impact on sea turtle populations and thus the more schools and children that receive this education, the greater the impact in the long run.

All in all, the day was deemed an amazing success for a first time event, with many smiling faces to be seen. Hopefully our turtle the med activities helped to spread awareness and information to a key audience, the sons and daughters of fishing families, and to inspire the future generation of Mozambican sea turtle conservationists.







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For more information:

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