

SSME Tri-national Sea Turtle Conservation Program: A Proposal

Species at risk

Only seven species of sea turtle remain in the world, and all are listed as either endangered or vulnerable on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Animals. Of these, five species—green, hawksbill, olive ridley, loggerhead, and leatherback—are found in the Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Ecoregion (SSME). In fact, two of the largest remaining populations of green and hawksbill turtles are found in Southeast Asia, with two major rookeries or nesting grounds found in the SSME.

The excessive exploitation of their eggs, meat, and carapace have greatly diminished this once large group of migratory reptiles. In many areas, sea turtles have been locally extirpated. While sea turtles are now protected by national and local laws of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, all of which are part of the global network to conserve the turtles, new conservation strategies need to be tried and tested.

The good news of security

The governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have long recognized the value of the sea turtles as a natural heritage of the peoples of the Sulu

and Sulawesi Seas. This is why these three countries are taking such an active role in promoting bilateral, regional, inter-regional, and international commitments to unify conservation efforts on a global scale.

Within the SSME, a fitting example of the turtle conservation initiative is the Turtle Islands Heritage Protected Area (TIHPA). The TIHPA is the first transborder cooperation between the governments

of Malaysia and the Philippines formed with the assistance of the WWF to conserve the nesting population of the Turtle Islands. The Protected Area seeks to contribute to the protection of the world's largest concentration of green and hawksbill turtles in the world. Since its designation as such, a joint management committee composed of both governments and the WWF-Philippines ensures the protection of turtle eggs laid in the TIHPA and prohibits the slaughter or capture of the turtles themselves.

Like Malaysia and the Philippines, Indonesia

also protects all its species of sea turtles through legislation. All three countries are signatories to the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) agreement, and their ASEAN ministers have signed the 1997 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Conservation and Protection of Marine Turtles.



The Philippines is a signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and their Habitats of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia (IOSEA-MOU), while Indonesia is a participating non-signatory state.

The need for a tri-national initiative

With these fundamental policy directions now in place, the time is right for the implementation of a tri-national initiative for the protection of endangered, threatened, or vulnerable species under the SSME Conservation Plan (ECP).

The ECP builds a strong partnership across borders that would expand and coordinate efforts to provide a full range of protection for sea turtles in key sites of the vulnerable stages in this animal's life.

In line with this, the SSME Program facilitated the conduct of a tri-national training and workshop on sea turtles in 2002. The first was a training on the biology, conservation, and management of sea turtles. The second one was the drafting of a Tri-National Sea Turtle Conservation Program for the SSME. This program calls for the networking of databases and research efforts, increasing the people's awareness and the stakeholders' capacity to collectively conserve the turtles, and developing turtle-based ecotourism and other livelihood activities that could sustain the conservation program and support the SSME conservation goals.

The Framework for a Network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) would allow the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to catalyze the need for a tri-national initiative on the conservation and management of sea turtles in the SSME.

The case of saving the sea turtles

The WWF-Philippines upholds the vision and responsibility of establishing MPAs in the SSME.

A strong commitment to aid the sea turtle conservation effort through on-site institutional operations underlies the WWF program in the area, which includes field research, community integration, inter-government coordination, and resource mobilization. Thus far, the program has been promoting proper conservation ethos for the sea turtles and their critical habitats, in harmony with local cultures, values, and development activities, at the community level within the SSME. Such an advocacy campaign, along with its broader conservation goals, has yet to be sustained though in the long run.

A formal tri-national framework could ease the implementation of the conservation agenda for



the sea turtles and optimize the pacing and performance of activities. Exchanges of knowledge, experiences, and management styles among various communities within the ecoregion would be imperative to the success of this initiative, and the

role of research and training on sea turtle biology, ecology, and behavior cannot be downplayed.

As the turtles' migratory routes and reproductive mechanisms become clearer, their ecoregional importance will be appropriately highlighted. In addition, there is a need to establish a network of MPAs that would completely protect the genetic structure of specific turtle populations. Such a network of would be based on an integrated management approach that considers the sea turtles' different populations and life stages, as fragmented and partial protection has already been deemed insufficient and ineffective.

In this light, any conservation agenda must therefore be premised on a sound information base and placed under a broadened organizational arrangement. By working together, an interdependent, complementary, and unified tri-national conservation program for sea turtles can be realized. ■