

**The 26th International Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation -
(Island of Crete, Greece, 3-8 April 2006)
President's Report on the Symposium and ISTS Business**

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The Symposium

Overview

The 26th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation was admittedly a pronounced success. For the first time in its long history it was hosted in the Mediterranean, on the island of Crete, and this gave many under-represented countries an opportunity to take part in this globally important event. With about 700 participants from 78 countries it fulfilled its motto: 'Diverse Cultures, One Purpose'.

The Island of Crete, at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe proved an excellent selection. Also the meeting's venue, Capsis Beach Hotel at the village of Aghia Pelaghia, located 20 km from Heraklion International airport, provided adequate facilities, agreeable surroundings, and relatively good prices.

Submitted abstracts surpassed the five hundred mark (500!), breaking records of all previous Symposia, loading the Program Officers (Dr. Brendan Godley and Dr. Kartik Shanker) and the 35-member Program Committee with a tremendous amount of work, which culminated in the 376-page Book of Abstracts, printed on time for on-site distribution to participants. Here I should also mention the scholastic work of the four compilers (Mick Frick, Aliko Panagopoulou, Alan Rees and Kris Williams).

On 3rd and 4th April, regional meetings took place: the 5th Mediterranean Reunion, the Latin American (RETOMALA) meeting, and the WIDECAST (Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Network) meeting. On 4th April two more regional meetings were

added: the IOSEA (Indian Ocean and South-East Asia) meeting and the Africa meeting. Details of these meetings can be obtained by contacting the regional coordinators, although I believe that individual reports will appear either in the MTN or in regional listservers.

The official opening took place in the morning of 5th April, with welcome speeches from the Symposium President, the Prefect of Heraklion Mr. D. Sarris, and the Coordinator of UNEP's Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) Mr. Paul Mifsud. The invited speaker of the Symposium was Dr. Wolf Michael Iwand of TUI, the largest tour operator in the world, who talked about the interaction of sea turtles and the tourist industry and how these two could best benefit from each other; it was a really challenging talk, with examples from various parts of the world.

In a special two and a half hour session in memory of Peter Lutz, named 'Sea Turtle Biology without Boundaries', six review presentations on various aspects of turtle biology were presented. I would like to thank Jeanette Wyneken who organized this special session.

From 5th through 7th April, 101 oral and 340 poster contributions were presented, covering the following standard sessions: Behavior and Movements; Conservation, Management and Policy; Population Biology and Monitoring; Fisheries Interaction; Anatomy, Physiology and Health; Ecology and Evolutionary Biology; Social Science Research; Education, Outreach and Advocacy, plus two special sessions: Turtles and Climate Change, and Ecological Roles of Marine Turtles. We tried to create an agreeable atmosphere for poster sessions and we installed them close to

the coffee break area and an always-open bar with a view of the blue Aegean Sea. However, the large number of posters did not allow us to have all posters set up for the whole Symposium's duration.

On 6th April, a Panel Discussion, organized by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council and named 'Cooperative Approaches to Implement Sea Turtle Bycatch Solutions in Longline Fisheries', took place on the global issue of longline turtle captures.

On Saturday, 8th April, the usual Annual Meeting of the IUCN's Marine Turtle Specialist Group took place with regional reports from the Regional Chairs and a discussion on the Global Burning Issues. On Saturday afternoon the Freshwater and Terrestrial Turtle Workshop took place, which gave emphasis to regional issues.

The Archie Carr Student Best Paper Competition

Nine awards were given to the best and runners up student oral and poster presentations in two major categories: Biology and Conservation. In total, 146 student presentations presented by 111 student candidates were examined by the Judging Committee. The award certificates were accompanied by a small honorarium and a subscription to *Chelonian Conservation and Biology*; in total 2,000 USD and 1,000 Euro were awarded to the nine students. Half of the totally awarded sum came as usual from the Chelonian Research Foundation (thank you very much, Anders). I thank the co-chairs of the Judges, Lisa Campbell and Jeanette Wyneken, as well as the 22-member Judging Committee for this important task.

Travel Grants

In total, 131 travel grants were distributed, either as cash or as "free" rooms, through generous donations from Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, US Fish & Wildlife Service, US National Marine Fisheries Service, UNEP's RAC/SPA, Disney's Animal Kingdom, Chelonian Research Institute (CRI), Marine Conservation Society (MCS), WWF Italy, Bern Convention (Council of Europe), Leatherback Trust, the CCC and the IUCN Centre for Mediterranean

Cooperation. Also many smaller donors and "room sponsors", too many to mention here. I must note here the serious constraint that the President has to face when asked by the Travel Committee "how much" we should give for grants. Initially, I allocated 53,000 USD, which later was increased to about 56,000 USD. Pending final evaluation by ISTS Treasurer Ed Drane, I can say that, in general, we did very well financially. The problem is that we didn't know this before allocating the travel grants. Here it comes the need for a Reserve Travel Fund, which will allow next Presidents to know in advance how much funds can be available as grants, with a decent degree of certainty. I should mention here the great efforts (and successes) by Manjula Tiwari, Angela Formia, Susan Ranger and Rob Tryland in securing special funds from the CRI and the MCS for our colleagues from Africa; a major objective of this Symposium. A brilliant idea of Susan was that the left-over money from those grants will remain earmarked for Africans for the next Symposium!

Simultaneous interpretation

Thanks to the UNEP/MAP's Headquarters, based in Athens, we were able to have simultaneous interpretation to French during the Africa Meeting and during the first day Plenary. Unfortunately the high costs of having two sets of translators, plus equipment, did not allow us to have translations during the subsequent concurrent sessions.

Involvement of the media

An early advice from Earl Possardt, President of the 22nd STS, was to involve as much as I could the media in order to make public some important sea turtle topics. Thanks to the support of Conservation International (CI) we were able to set a Press Room, equipped with computers, fax and internet and to have the expert involvement of the CI's Global Communications Task Force, represented in Lisa Bailey, who together with Dimos Tsandilis and Theoni Karkoulia of ARCHELON were assigned to liaise with journalists, to find the appropriate experts for interviews and to draft news releases in English and in Greek. Two journalists from far-away lands (Colombia, Indonesia) stayed on-site and covered fully the event, while several local journalists were

in and out. Various Symposium events appeared many times in local, national and international media. In addition, a daily blog hosted at conservation.org, and another one (in Greek) at the website of ARCHELON, were set to inform journalists who could not attend the Symposium.

Local Participation

We have tried to involve the local community on Crete as much as possible. In this regard, schoolteachers of Heraklion were informed well before about the Symposium and prepared and implemented various activities in the schools of Heraklion, inspired by sea turtles. One result of these activities were the handicrafts, made by the children, exhibited during the Symposium at the Poster Area. I would like to thank the originator of this activity and member of ARCHELON Board Mr Helias Pitsikas, as well as the Head of the Education Department of Heraklion Mr Dimitris Apostolakis. Further, a meeting with local fishermen took place in the nearby harbour of Rethymno to discuss ways of mitigating turtle captures. It is worth to note that these fishermen participated in the Mediterranean Reunion, together with the local Fisheries Department officials and the Coast Guard and presented their views.

Entertainment

The best part of the Symposium. On Tuesday, during the Welcome Cocktail we had the Cretan dancers, young women and men, with the local musicians playing the “lyra” (an ancient instrument – mythology says that Orpheus had his lyra made of a tortoise shell). I will include the Auction in this section. Silent Auction gathered a great many things, well arranged and organized by the Auction Chair Theodoros Benos-Palmer. The live Auction was a success both as entertainment (it was the peculiar exotic drinks that Rod Mast took care to sell first) and also as an additional fund (more than 13,000 USD were collected on-site, through the expert cashiers of the Hilton Head Protection Project, brought to Crete by Ed Drane). Thank you Rod! Thank you Ed! Thank you all those who donated all these lovely items!

When we were drafting the Symposium schedule, we called the traditional Symposium banquet a “Farewell Party” because we didn’t know, until the last minute, what and where to do it. They were ideas of having it right “on the hotel’s beach”, or at the open theater, or even outside the hotel compound in one of those huge places, very common in Crete, where weddings are celebrated in a Cretan-style manner. Since no weddings were in sight we resorted in the relative safety of the hotel dining room. The food was excellent, thanks to the always-checking-the-details Thanos and the abundant home-made raki, a very welcome gift of the local Prefect.

Now, I want to say few words about dancing. As we all know, dancing is a form of self-expression. This is very conspicuous in the case of Greek dances; thus the many forms of them, especially the solitary ones. When I was dancing with Mike Coyne, the new President, the Zorba dance I wanted to show you the steps of an easy Greek dance with the hope that some of you (at least) would dance on your own. However, when we finished and the band started to play Greek tunes I was truly amazed to see Latinos, middle-easterners and even northern Americans to inundate the dancing floor, leaping and circling with amazing grace and long-time expertise.

Closing my report for the 26th Symposium, I should mention the long preparatory work done by the personnel of ARCHELON, as well as of the Symposium Coordinator Thanos Belalidis, without whom the Symposium wouldn’t happen. I thank all participants, all sponsors and donors, all members of Committees and Task Forces, the staff of ARCHELON and all Symposium volunteers for making this event a memorable one.

ISTS Business

The International Sea Turtle Society (ISTS) is doing great steps forward. These were extensively discussed at the BoD Retreat in August 2005 and also at the BoD Meeting on Crete. Three major issues were presented at the ISTS Plenary Business Meeting on Crete (7 April): nominations, resolutions, modifications of by-laws and constitution.

Nominations & Elections

A very clear procedure was announced through MTN, the ISTS website and individual messages to all members, setting a deadline for nominations on 15 November 2005. The 5-member Nominating Committee (NC) had set criteria and evaluated each received nomination. Eventually, the BoD decided to present to the membership a multiple slate for the 2 BoD & the 2 NC positions, and also to accept nominations from the floor during the Plenary. I think that this is a good measure that enhances participation and upgrades transparency and democracy. Following a secret ballot, the following candidates were elected: Ana Barragan and Naoki Kamezaki for the BoD positions, and Scott Eckert and Alberto Abreu for the NC. The BoD slate for the Executive Committee presented by NC (i.e. President-Elect: Wallace J. Nichols, Treasurer: Edwin Drane, Secretary: Manjula Tiwari) was unanimously voted. At this point, I would like to congratulate the new members and also to thank very much for their contribution the departing BoD members Frank Paladino and Clara Padilla, the past president Nicolas Pilcher, and the NC members Matthew Godfrey and Neca Marcovaldi.

Resolutions

As discussed in a previous article (Margaritoulis, MTN 110: 10-11) there has been skepticism within the BoD as regards the effectiveness of resolutions. Further, the existing procedure was cumbersome, provided little time for deliberations among the BoD members and needed some persistent work for following up. There have been proposals to substitute resolutions for a more effective advocacy strategy. To confront the above, and following a rationale from a task force, the procedure for submitting resolutions became more clear and strict, and a Resolutions Committee (RC) was created, including Jack Frazier, Jeff Seminoff, Kartik Shanker, Manjula Tiwari, in order to handle the matter of resolutions in a more efficient way. This initiative has already been successful. In the context of the 26th Symposium, four resolutions were accepted by the RC and the BoD, plus one that was tabled from the previous Symposium. All five resolutions were adopted by the Plenary Business Meeting on Crete, and are the following:

1. Resolution to support the adoption and implementation of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's "Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations" by Parties to regional fishery management organizations and sea turtle agreements.
2. Designation of Puerto Rico's Northeastern Ecological Corridor as a Nature Reserve.
3. Resolution to Minimise Disturbance to Nesting Loggerhead Turtles (*Caretta caretta*) by Tourist Activities on the Island of Zakynthos, Greece.
4. Resolution on the Need to Strengthen and Implement the Recovery Plan for Kemp's Ridley.
5. On the Need to Strengthen Protection of the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles by Creating a Texas-Mexico Protected International Swimway.

You can find the above resolutions in the Symposium website. All were duly dispatched to the competent authorities and, as a good sign, we have already received some constructive replies from them. I must thank all members of the RC but above all the Resolution Chair Jack Frazier.

Modification of the ISTS by-laws and constitution

The ever-expanding mandate and international character of our Society asks for changes in its instruments and procedures; thus the necessary modifications of these documents. Thanks to the dedicated work of Frank Paladino and Nancy FitzSimmons, the BoD came up with a draft of the proposed changes, which were approved by the membership at the Plenary Business Meeting on Crete. Modification of by-laws is a lengthy process, and needs the input of as many members as possible in order to be able to have long-lasting, modern and flexible rules that will govern our society.

Concerning the ISTS business, I would like to express my thanks to the members of the Executive Committee (Michael Coyne, Thane Wibbels, Edwin Drane, Manjula Tiwari), the Board of Directors (Clara Padilla, Frank Paladino, Milani Chaloupka, Jeffrey Seminoff, Hedelvy Guada, Donna Shaver, Nancy FitzSimmons, Lisa Campbell, Brendan Godley, Kartik Shanker), and the 3 past presidents participating at the BoD meetings (Nicolas Pilcher, Roderic Mast, Thane Wibbels).