

SIXTH MEETING OF IOSEA SIGNATORY STATES

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The Sixth Meeting of the Signatory States was held in Bangkok, Thailand, from 23–27 January 2012, preceded by a two-day session of the IOSEA Advisory Committee. The meeting was chaired by Dr. Maitree Duangsawadi, retired Director-General of Thailand's Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, and former IOSEA Focal Point. The organisation of the meeting was supported by generous contributions from the Governments of France and the United States. Twenty-three Signatory States were officially represented at SS6, along with a nearly full contingent of Advisory Committee members, as well as invited experts and observers from various intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations.

The four days of wide-ranging discussions generated the most interesting ideas about the future direction of marine turtle conservation of any IOSEA Signatory State Meeting to date. After taking advantage of an opportunity to discuss issues in sub-regional groups, the meeting agreed that the following issues were the highest priorities for IOSEA to address in the immediate future: 1) illegal direct take of marine turtles; 2) identification of index beaches associated with genetic stocks; 3) capacity-building in support of Signatory State efforts; 4) investigation of indirect take in legal fisheries; and 5) socio-economic considerations of relevance to marine turtle conservation. Most of the issues identified by Signatory States as high priorities corresponded closely with issues that the Advisory Committee had reflected upon during its earlier meeting. In each instance, the Committee had suggested mechanisms that might be pursued in the coming biennium to make progress towards the desired conservation outcomes.

One of the highlights of the gathering was the finalisation of a proposal to create a Network of Sites of Importance for Marine Turtles in the IOSEA region, culminating many years of intensive development work and discussion. The network aims to enhance the local-to-global scale recognition of the importance of selected sites, while offering conservation benefits that are most readily achieved through a coordinated mechanism. Delegates fine-tuned the contents of the proposal, before adopting a resolution that sets out a schedule for finalising

the selection criteria for the network, soliciting site nominations from Signatory States, and proceeding with the formal launch of the network at the next meeting of Signatory States.

The Secretariat presented its customary overview of IOSEA implementation progress, based on an exhaustive analysis of information submitted by Signatory States in their national reports. More than 80 percent of Signatory States were reported to have improved their implementation and reporting of IOSEA Conservation and Management Plan measures, many very substantially. Signatory States have done well to describe “best practice” approaches they have undertaken to reduce threats to marine turtles and their habitats; to document a range of socio-economic studies; and to put in place measures to counteract adverse economic incentives that contribute to turtle mortality. Advances have also been made in the reporting of fisheries potentially interacting with turtles, as well as measures aimed at reducing incidental capture and mortality; and most Signatories have undertaken interesting research and development activities in support of bycatch reduction.

The reports of Signatory States describe the important economic uses of marine turtles. Virtually all countries have enacted legislation to prohibit direct harvest and domestic trade in turtles and derivatives, although traditional consumption of meat and eggs still occurs. Almost all have measures in place to minimise or reduce the mortality of eggs, hatchlings and nesting females. These including monitoring programmes, extensive education/awareness activities, and debris removal and beach clean-up activities. Most Signatories have undertaken research and monitoring of turtles, with impressive advances made in satellite tracking to help elucidate migration routes, and in genetic profiling of turtle populations. Very good progress has been made to prioritise national conservation and management activities, and also to identify issues for which international cooperation is considered essential.

The Secretariat reported that the online IOSEA database now contains information on more than 1,000 sites of importance for marine turtles, a substantial increase since

2008. The system can be mined to gather information on each species, including the threats they face and the mitigation measures that are being implemented at individual sites. The analysis revealed that areas in need of further improvement by Signatory States include, among others, better documentation of incidental capture and mortality of turtles, use of alternative fishing practices, and identification and protection of critical habitat outside of protected areas. Signatory States were encouraged to undertake more systematic exchange of information and closer collaboration and coordination of activities, to better articulate their resource needs, to try to mobilise increased domestic resources for implementation, and participate in more equitable sharing of IOSEA's operational costs.

Two workshops incorporated into the conference programme provided much food for thought: one focused on satellite tracking in the IOSEA region and the other on impacts of climate change and related mitigation strategies. Dr. Peter Richardson gave a very informative introduction to satellite tracking which illustrated the uses of this remarkable technology and encouraged participants to reflect on the kinds of research questions it could address. This was followed by a lively question and answer session involving expert panellists, and group discussions that identified priority areas for future satellite tracking work. The account of the satellite tracking workshop annexed to the main meeting report captures the essence of this enriching session.

Dr. Colin Limpus teamed up with Dr. Mark Hamann to convene the second workshop on climate change and mitigation strategies, which provided an opportunity for participants to discuss issues of concern regarding management of marine turtles in the context of global climate change. The workshop included technical presentations that dealt with the biological background to global warming impacts on turtle egg incubation, hatchery management in response to warming beaches, and the impact of extreme climate events on foraging turtles and dugongs in eastern Australia. The expert panel discussion that followed stressed the importance of maintaining resilience in the ecosystem, and of obtaining long-term monitoring information which would provide a better foundation for responding with mitigation approaches. Apart from the two workshops, the meeting was enlightened by two additional expert presentations: the first on the use of spatial planning tools to identify areas of high conservation priority for sea turtles, delivered by Dr. Ronel Nel; and the second on various innovative information systems for exchanging data on sea turtles, presented by Prof. Pat Halpin.

The Meeting received an update from Dr. Mark Hamann

on progress towards finalising a long-anticipated assessment of the conservation status of loggerhead turtles. An advanced draft was made available for review, and the document is expected to be finalised by mid-2012. Already, some recommendations for additional conservation action have been formulated, including genetics work and population identification in Sri Lanka, analysis of existing data from the Northwest Indian Ocean, collection of bycatch and mortality data, and various other species-specific studies.

The Meeting also revisited the comprehensive leatherback assessment from 2006, which had been the focus of recent attention aimed at updating basic information on the species' current conservation status, and identifying progress made towards filling important information gaps and areas in need of further work. In presenting the progress made so far, Dr. Ronel Nel confirmed that the updating exercise also provided for the development of specific project concepts to take forward some of the key recommendations that had been proposed in the 2006 assessment, but had not yet been acted upon. The document is expected to be ready for circulation in April 2012.

The Meeting formally adopted 'Terms of Reference and Guidance for IOSEA Focal Points', which clarify the general roles and responsibilities of IOSEA national and sub-regional Focal Points, and offer guidance to assist Focal Points in their intersessional work, as well as in the preparation for future meetings of the Signatory States. The IOSEA sub-regional Focal Points were reconfirmed as follows: Indonesia (for South-East Asia+), India (for Northern Indian Ocean); United Arab Emirates (for Northwest Indian Ocean); and Madagascar (for Western Indian Ocean). It was further agreed that the Secretariat would facilitate regular consultations with the four sub-regional Focal Points and the Advisory Committee Chair. The IOSEA Advisory Committee was reconstituted with the addition of one new member, Dr. Manjula Tiwari, and the re-nomination of two existing members who will serve alongside five other Committee members who have served half of their terms. Further development of technical support to Signatory States, review of the selection criteria for the IOSEA Site Network (and eventually the site nominations themselves), and finalisation of the loggerhead assessment are among the tasks the Committee will be working on in the coming months.

IOSEA Coordinator Douglas Hykle paid tribute to two Advisory Committee members, Dr. Colin Limpus and Dr. Jack Frazier, for their lifetime service to marine turtle conservation, and presented each with a plaque to formally recognise their enormous contributions. ■