

Health

From the Mediterranean biggest nesting ground, turtles swim to uncertain future

KYPARISSIA: Freed from its eggshell by a volunteer, the tiny turtle hatchling clambers across a pebble-strewn sandy Greek beach in a race to the sea, the start of a hazardous journey that only one in 1,000 will survive. Kira Schirmacher, 22, donning black gloves to gently ease the newborn loggerhead turtle on its way, grins at suggestions that she's a kind of "midwife". "Yes, I do that all day," says the German social sciences student, of her role.

She's one of several volunteers monitoring the beaches of Kyparissia Bay, the Mediterranean's largest nesting ground for the loggerhead, whose scientific name is *Caretta caretta*. Tourism, climate change and good fortune all weigh on the future of the loggerhead population, which the International Union for Conservation of Nature lists as vulnerable. Even sun loungers on the beach that can snag the turtles and bright lights that lure the hatchlings away from the water at night are potential threats, say environmentalists.

Growing in the Med

Their overall numbers are unknown but some Pacific and Indian Ocean populations are critically low, while conservation measures have bolstered their presence in the Mediterranean, environmental groups say. With around 44 kilometers of coastline, Kyparissia on the western Peloponnese, had over 3,700 nests this year, up from 3,500 in

2018, says the Athens-based Archelon turtle protection organization. "It seems (more of) our female turtles survive and come back to nest," says oceanographer Dimitris Fytilis, head of the organization's rescue centre for injured turtles in the coastal Athens suburb, Glyfada. Each nest contains up to 120 eggs but up to a fifth may fail to hatch at all.

In danger from birth

Loggerheads can live to 80 years of age, grow to more than half a meter and weigh up to 80 kilos (175 pounds) but face mortal danger from birth. Newborns must evade dogs, jackals, foxes, seagulls and other predators just to make it to the sea. Once in the water, the five-centimeter turtle will swim non-stop for at least 24 hours to work its lungs and find food but is prey to crabs, fish and even adult turtles.

More than 600 turtles turn up dead in Greece every year, mostly on beaches but also in the water, trapped in nets or sick, the rescue centre says. It has treated more than 1,100 injured turtles since it began in 1994 and receives some 70 new cases every year. The turtles ingest fishhooks and plastic debris but more than half of their injuries are caused by humans, usually by blows to the head with oars and axes. Fishermen are often blamed as repairing fishing nets damaged by turtles can be costly.

Hit by 'global warming'

Climate change has also created the potential to shift the turtle gender balance, as males cannot incubate at a nest temperature above 29.3 degrees C (84.7 F). "There is already an effect in some countries... in Australia for example, more females are born now because of global warming," Fytilis said. Another key nesting ground at Laganas Bay, in Zakynthos on the Ionian island of Zante, attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists annually. Like in other popular tourist destinations, environmental groups have for decades tussled with hotels and restaurants that chafe against protection efforts.

'Natural treasure'

"We don't really get support from the locals," says Schirmacher, in Kyparissia. But one hotelier in the resort suggests the area should develop its turtle tourism. "There should be a glass-bottomed boat for turtle watching, but the authorities here can't even build a proper road to the beach," he fumes. Adding to ecologists' concerns are moves by Greece's new conservative government to relax environmental restrictions to promote further tourism investment.

Plans to expand energy prospecting in the Ionian Sea and near Crete have also sparked anger. WWF and Greenpeace last month warned that a planned lease of 50,000



KYPARISSIA: Newborn loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) head towards the sea after got free from their eggshells at a beach in Kyparissia, south west Greece. — AFP

square kilometers (20,000 square miles) of sea for oil exploration would endanger "emblematic tourism destinations... that contribute billions of euros and hundreds of thousands of jobs to the national economy."

Archelon stresses that the turtles' presence is a key indicator of sea water quality. "We are fortunate to have these habitats. This is a natural treasure. It needs to be protected, not exploited," warns Fytilis. — AFP

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