Project Update: February 2013

Talking about Mozambique's turtles to the rest of the world.

The theme of 'connections' was achieved before the symposium speed talks or special focus sessions had even begun, as it drew together over 1200 scientists, conservationists, policy makers, field volunteers from as far afield as the federated states of Micronesia, Uruguay and yours truly Mozambique.

In Baltimore, Maryland, USA during the first week of February 2013 I gathered with other sea turtle biologists to share the latest work, exchange ideas about upcoming works I have planned for turtle conservation and research in Mozambique, search for new ideas, latest techniques, technologies and network with other like-minded and hardworking turtle-heads!

The one-day Africa regional meeting contained detailed updates of the latest works happening around the whole African coast. It was an interesting opportunity to put into context the poaching situation in Mozambique with that of other places along Africa's expansive coastline. Some projects like those at Cape Verde have found success by involving their national military to patrol nesting coastline and deter poaching. Another noticeable trait from the regional meetings was the greater emphasis for sea turtle research on the western seaboard rather than the east. Though this may partly be due to the increased interest in researchers pursuing investigations into the connectivity/ migration routes between Western Africa and Americas.

A popular speaker at ISTS events, Dr 'J' Nichols gave an enthralling talk exploring the ideas of connections and the passion and love, (of the ocean, of turtles and of your work) required to be successful in an increasingly demanding and multidisciplinary field of study - sea turtle conservation. This was followed by a series of key speakers from long-term projects held in various beaches globally featuring the way they achieved success and the obstacles that needed to be overcome.

On the third morning of the conference, I presented for the first time results from the study I have been working on for the past year. Its central theme is based around the concept of using 'citizen scientists' - volunteers that are non-specialists to maximise data collection of turtles encountered during dives. Some of the first results on the in-water population were also discussed. The key theme of the talk was to present our data as a case study to share the lessons we learnt and ways to improve the quality of the data. This could be achieved by differing the training techniques, collection or methodologies to maximise the ways the data could be used to realistically represent the population. We now have a very simplistic baseline for three species of turtles inhabiting our coastal waters from which we can use to justify further and more detailed data collection. This information can also be used as a way to gauge changes to the population over time. By understanding what impacts the population is facing and how this might affect it, we can brainstorm for effective conservation actives.

The talk was received well and it appears a number of other places (Egypt, Malaysia and Cocos

Island) are considering using similar programs to collect data. We look forward to building collaborations with these projects and sharing our knowledge on the subject. The long term goal of this work, aside from improving the conservation efforts locally, is to develop an ideal model and training packs that could be distributed to help other projects utilise citizen scientists to improve sea turtle conservation efforts globally.

Generous thanks to the ISTS travel grant awarded to help cover travel costs and for providing accommodation for the week. "