



MIAMBY FANO

Guardian of the turtle

Reefdoctor: Turtle project

Reefdoctor established in Ifaty since 2000, is now an integral part of the Malagasy community throughout the Ranobe region; as a result reefdoctor is able to consider projects previously deemed too sensitive to approach. These projects were set in motion with advice and consent from the Ifaty president, vice president and respected elders.

In early 2008, one of the controversial issues approached by reefdoctor was the capture and slaughter of sea turtles for food and as part of traditional Vezo way of life. In response to this Miambly fano (guardian of the turtle) was formed in Ifaty; the program is in perpetual consultation with fishermen, collectors and reefdoctor's dedicated science team. The project has been a success and more importantly had been accepted in Ifaty, this is a vital way for Reefdoctor to consult and assess the impact of this very sensitive issue and we hope to expand Miambly fano throughout the Ranobe area.

Although it is illegal to capture and slaughter all species of sea turtle, the official attempts to protect marine turtles dating back to 1923, including the ratification of international conventions in 1975 and 1988 and the protection of breeding grounds (Lilette 2006) has had little success in the Southwest. This has resulted in the extinction of all breeding populations in the Toliara region; yet, the Toliara reef system is still a major feeding ground and supports a substantial population.

However, the Vezo like many tribes in Madagascar are continuing to utilize sea turtle as a source of protein, much the same as other products they harvest from the ocean in subsistence fishing. Turtle fishers receive little or no resistance in the outlying provinces, and turtle meat fetches a good price, the consequential pressures on an already vulnerable species are thus far, unknown because of limited research in this field.

In 2006, in response to increasing pressures to protect this vulnerable species from extinction, the FAO implemented a management plan for the national policy on marine turtle's conservation.

The specific aims and objectives of the plan are;

- To look at periods of high capture rates corresponding with nesting periods for the Indian Ocean species that inhabit the coastal waters

- Tagging programmes: to monitor marine turtle populations, migration patterns, breeding activity, growth and mortality factors
- Genetic studies : to identify separate breeding populations, to get information on the genetic variability within each population
- Identification of fishing gears that interact significantly with sea turtles as well as the areas and times of the years when captures are more frequent

Reefdoctor, identifying with these objectives and working through Miamby fano in collaboration with students from the local marine university IH.SM are together trying to implement the suggestions of the FAO and establish baseline data on the distribution, abundance and threats to marine turtles throughout the Ranobe area.

Research

Data collected by reefdoctor in 2008 (fig 1) illustrates the scale of the turtle fishery based Ifaty, a small village with only a handful of people involved. The true scale of the operation is unknown and needs immediate investigation to mitigate the impact on populations, especially as regards to the targeted species *C.mydas*, (green turtle). A comparison with data from as far back as 1987 (fig 2) shows low capture rates on comparison with previous years, however, limited data is available and spatial and temporal data is needed before assumptions can be made.

Kartik Shanker advisor for the FAO on marine turtle status and conservation in the Indian Ocean suggested that it is time for the people of the region to understand that turtles are an important component of marine ecosystems, that they offer benefits far beyond the tangible, and that their conservation is a public process, not one driven by a handful of dedicated individuals. For this there is a need for a widespread awareness campaign, coupled with programs that (1) assess the socio-economic status of those affected by changed management strategies and, if necessary, provide alternative livelihoods, and (2) are supported by contemporary knowledge, sound research and monitoring techniques.

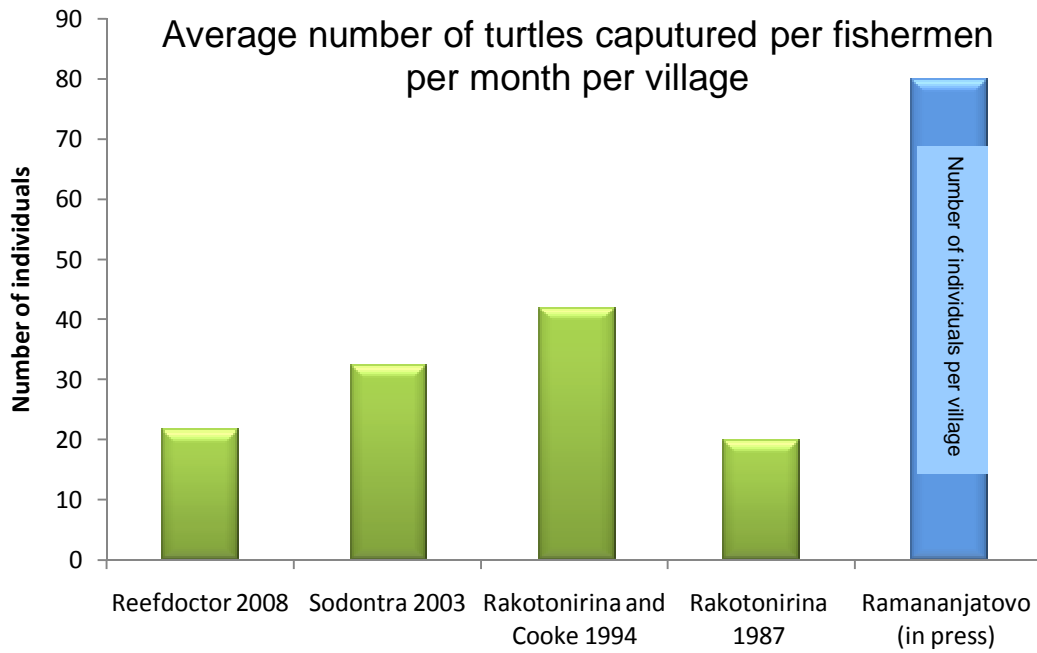


Figure 1: Research data gathered from 1987-2008 displaying different capture rates per fisherman per month per village in the Toliara region

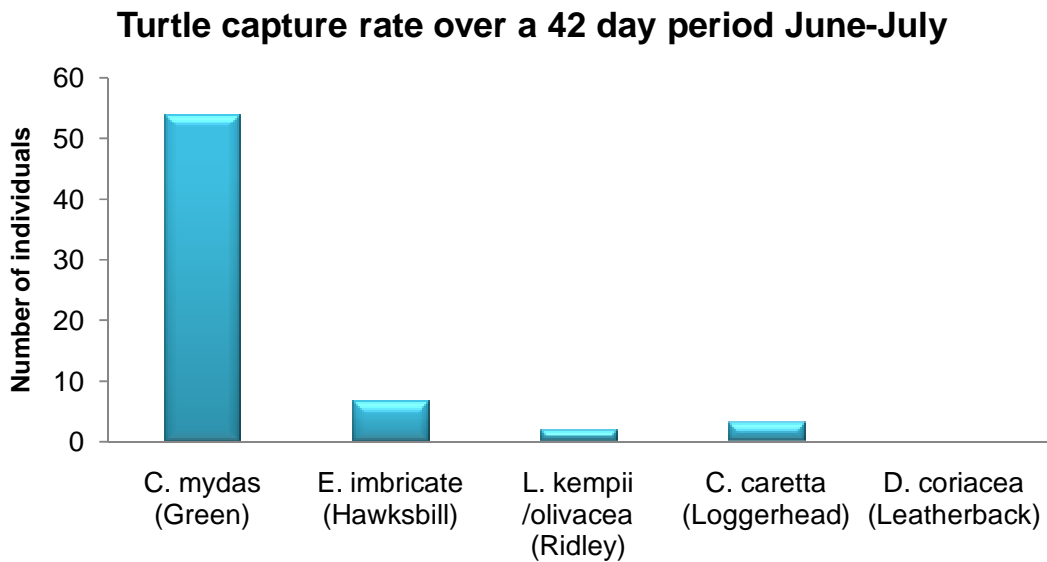


Figure 2; Turtle capture rate of individuals over a 42 day period from June to July, 2008 Ifaty, southwest Madagascar

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