



CONTINUITY IN A COMMUNITY SETTING

The Ulithi Marine Turtle Program

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The Ulithi Marine Turtle Program is a community conservation project based in Ulithi Atoll, located 115 miles northeast of Yap, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and spanning an ocean area nearly 18 miles long and 9 miles wide. Green and hawksbill turtles forage and nest throughout FSM, and as elsewhere in the world they are highly vulnerable to fisheries, marine debris, and disease. Turtles are also an important part of the local culture, revered by the Ulithian people and carefully managed to this day by tribal law and age-old tradition.

Recognizing the mounting threats to turtles everywhere and their cultural importance locally, the program began community-based research there in 2005, aiming to learn more about the green turtle nesting population on Ulithi's uninhabited islands and to promote sea turtle conservation and management. In the ensuing decade, many lessons have been learned about what constitutes success in managing projects and monitoring turtles in an extremely remote, local community setting.

Sea turtles live a long time and reproduce late in life; therefore, to study a population effectively and to ultimately define trends requires

many years of consistent monitoring. With this in mind, the Ulithi Marine Turtle Program has set goals aimed at achieving success through long-term continuity. Keeping a project staffed, funded, and robust over the time it takes to produce significant results continues to be one of the greatest challenges, and the project's existence today is a strong testament to its success in this regard.

Since 2005, the Ulithi Marine Turtle Program has worked with the local community of Falalop to tag and monitor nearly 3,000 green turtles nesting on the remote and uninhabited islands of Gielop and Loosiep. In addition, 12 female green turtles were fitted with satellite transmitters and successfully tracked to their foraging grounds in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Japan. Data generated by the project have been published and used by SWOT, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and other institutions to broaden understanding of local and global trends in turtle abundance.

Ensuring success in the eyes of the local community has perhaps been more challenging. In Ulithi, and in most remote island communities, sea turtles are a main source of protein in an area where food is



scarce, and turtles have been taken regularly as a food source for centuries. Local tradition dictates that no matter where a turtle is caught in Ulithi, it must be taken to the island of Mogmog for slaughter, after which the meat is shared among the community, with a portion going to the fisher. However, the turtle islands are owned and managed by leaders from Falalop and are accessed only by those who have traditional rights to the islands.

With the support of a few strong leaders, the project began in 2005. The field crew since its inception consisted completely of local men, who were trained in tagging, collecting morphometric data, and taking tissue samples for DNA analysis. Many of the original crew members are still working on the project and training new field assistants. After several years, the community began to see the value in the information that was being gathered and how this could help leaders and landowners make better management decisions. Almost 10 years later, the community now takes great pride in the project, and it has become something they look forward to each year. The turtle work has also laid the foundation for other conservation projects in Ulithi, such as the establishment of a reef monitoring program, support

for conservation-based volunteer work on the islands, and creation of venues for eco-based tourism. Furthermore, in 2011 the Ulithi island leaders met and created locally managed marine areas, which were based on traditional management systems.

In moving forward with the work in Ulithi, the goal is to continue to broaden the program by expanding to other islands and working more closely with partners. The project has been sponsored by the Oceanic Society since 2007 and largely funded by NOAA. This support made possible a continuous monitoring program spanning nine years and put Ulithi on the map for sea turtle conservation. Given the remoteness of the islands and the area's susceptibility to outside threats, the Ulithi Marine Turtle Program recognizes the importance of continuing to support the community in its efforts to conserve their valuable marine resources. ■

THIS PAGE: An aerial view of the Crab Islands near Falalop Island in Ulithi Atoll, Federated States of Micronesia, is shown. © WAYNE SENTMAN