

Sea Turtles in the Middle East



Green turtle hatchlings leave the beaches at Ra's Baridi on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast. The only major green turtle nesting site along this coast, it is threatened by a cement factory built directly on the nesting beach.



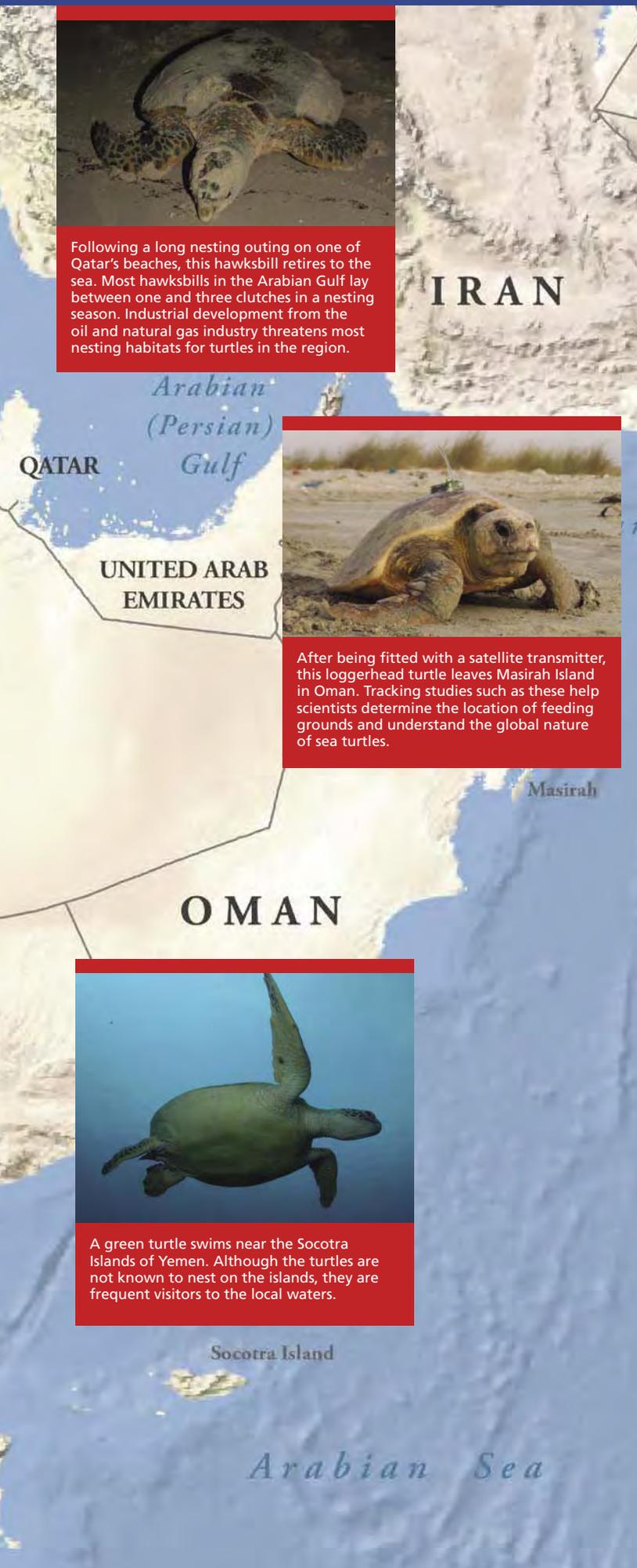
A green turtle nests on Saudi Arabia's Karan Island in the Arabian Gulf. More than 1,000 turtles nest on this small 2-kilometer (1.24-mile) island each season. With mice as the only natural predators of their eggs, turtle populations have flourished, but an increase in foreign fishers on the islands has brought the threat of poaching.



A hawksbill turtle swims among the corals of Sudan's Suakin Archipelago. Hawksbills often nest on remote islands in low densities, helping them to avoid predation.



An olive ridley nests close to Assab, Eritrea, in 2005. This was the first record of an olive ridley nesting in the Red Sea.



Following a long nesting outing on one of Qatar's beaches, this hawksbill retires to the sea. Most hawksbills in the Arabian Gulf lay between one and three clutches in a nesting season. Industrial development from the oil and natural gas industry threatens most nesting habitats for turtles in the region.



After being fitted with a satellite transmitter, this loggerhead turtle leaves Masirah Island in Oman. Tracking studies such as these help scientists determine the location of feeding grounds and understand the global nature of sea turtles.



A green turtle swims near the Socotra Islands of Yemen. Although the turtles are not known to nest on the islands, they are frequent visitors to the local waters.

Among the Middle East's many fascinating inhabitants are the thousands of sea turtles that roam the region's waters, feeding on a plethora of marine delicacies and arriving each year, with unfailing regularity, to nest on the region's shores. The Arabian Peninsula dominates the region: its beaches are washed by the Red Sea to the west; the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Seas to the south and east, respectively; and the Arabian (Persian) Gulf in the northeast. Each of these marine bodies hosts a kaleidoscope of unique fauna—including globally important sea turtle populations—and each population has its own conservation challenges.

Hawksbill turtles inhabit coral reefs, where they feed on sponges and other invertebrates. In the Middle East, they nest predominantly along the coasts of Iran and Qatar—where they are believed to number in the hundreds—and on the offshore islands of Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Smaller numbers nest in Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, and Yemen.

Herbivorous green turtles forage in shallow water seagrass pastures, which are found in restricted tracts along the Red Sea coast, along the southern coast of Oman, and throughout the southeast regions of the Arabian Gulf. These foraging zones are among the most important for the species in the northwest Indian Ocean, supporting nesting populations that number in the thousands. In Oman alone, more than 4,000 green turtles nest each year. On the Saudi Arabian islands of Jana and Karan, some 1,000 come ashore to lay eggs. Hundreds more nest along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts of Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Small populations of olive Ridleys also nest in Eritrea and Oman, and a number of leatherback turtles can be found foraging in the Red Sea and along the southern Arabian Gulf coasts.

The true jewel in the crown, however, is the loggerhead turtle population nesting at Masirah Island—an 85-kilometer (52.8-mile) stretch of land 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) off the southern coast of Oman. There, at this bastion of the Middle Eastern sea turtle empire, an estimated 30,000 loggerhead nests are laid each season. Loggerheads nest in smaller numbers in Yemen and possibly in Egypt, although no other major nesting aggregations are known.

For now, because direct exploitation has been historically low and because many Middle Eastern countries have fisheries policies that indirectly benefit turtles, the region continues to be a stronghold for the various turtle species. Their populations show little sign of decline, despite the increased human-induced pressures since the 20th-century discovery of petroleum reserves. Perhaps the greatest question for Middle Eastern turtles now is how and if they will survive the expanding footprint of continual human population growth and the accompanying industrial and commercial development that is already significantly polluting and diminishing the turtles' habitats.

Nicolas Pilcher and Jeff Miller have worked with marine turtles in the Middle East region since the mid-1980s. Along with colleagues Ali Al Kiyumi, Salim As Saady, Abdulaziz Al Jabri, Nasser Al Muraikhi, Anas Sambas, Mustafa Al Merghani, Ahmed Al Mansi, Mohammed Saad, Asghar Mubarak, Saif Al Ghais, Fuad Nassib Saeed, Mohamed Smail Mohamed, Tabeth Abdellah Khamis, Malek Ahmed AbdelAziz, M. Abdulkarim, Abdulkarim Farrah, Jamal H. Bamanie, Johannes Tecklemariam, Sammy Mahmud, and Steffan Howe, as well as many volunteers, they have visited nearly every major nesting site and helped to develop conservation practices on many of them.