

AFRICAN CONSERVATION NETWORKS PURSUE A SHARED AGENDA

By Alexandre Girard and Roderic Mast



This group has forged a common vision: to generate expert recommendations for the long-term well-being of sea turtles, their habitats, and the human communities that interact with them.

GROWTH OF A MOVEMENT

Sea turtle conservation stakeholders in West Africa celebrated a major leap forward in Lomé, Togo, in October 2020 during a congress led by RASTOMA (the French acronym for the network of marine turtle conservation stakeholders for Central Africa, Réseau des Acteurs de la Sauvegarde des Tortues Marines en Afrique Centrale) and WASTCON (West African Sea Turtle Conservation). At this first-ever, subregional, marine turtle congress for Western and Central Africa, more than 70 participants from a dozen countries and a variety of national and international institutions gathered to validate priorities and to lay the foundation for a concerted action plan to protect marine turtles and their habitats along the full Atlantic coast of Africa. Special thanks to the French Global Environment Facility's Small-Scale Initiatives Program for their support that made the meeting possible.

RASTOMA began in 2012 with no plans or funding but with a small and very enthusiastic handful of like-minded sea turtle conservation stakeholders. After years of planning, their first General Assembly took place in 2015 at Pointe Noire (Republic of Congo), with a second in São Tomé in 2016, and a third in Kribi (Cameroon) in 2017. Among their first commitments, RASTOMA proudly participated in the creation of the first comprehensive maps of marine turtle biogeography for Africa (see *SWOT Report*, vol. XII, pp. 24–29). Since then, RASTOMA has further expanded in membership and in the diversity of areas represented. More important, the team has created an ever-growing spirit of community synergy; members support one another by sharing in-depth insights gained through cumulative centuries of sea turtle monitoring, community outreach, and local conservation work.

A COMMON VISION WITH PRACTICAL APPROACHES

From the outset, this group of African professionals has forged a common vision for a network in which civil society actors can openly collaborate on equal footing through respectful dialogue to generate expert recommendations for the long-term well-being of sea turtles, their habitats, and the human communities with which they interact. RASTOMA members compose a nonpartisan, politically unbiased movement. They function within the context of their respective institutional and community roles but outside the influences of local politics, government, and corporate agendas. To ensure that they have the tools necessary for this type of autonomy, the members have paid close attention to participatory decisionmaking; support for African leaders; and continuous dialogue with local communities to defend the role of African civil society in national, regional, and international planning for sea turtle conservation.

Early on in its establishment, RASTOMA set up a scientific council made up of about 30 international turtle specialists whose role is to inform the decisions of local actors and to participate in the creation of protocols for collecting, sharing, and making best use of sea turtle monitoring data for conservation purposes. Moreover, this council has helped RASTOMA's local partners to launch and conduct monitoring programs using protocols that are suited to the realities of the field in this remote and often culturally complex region, as well as to prioritize actions that are of benefit primarily to local stakeholders while being of value to the regional, national, and even global setting of priorities and conservation actions for sea turtles.

GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION

The governance of RASTOMA is organized to guarantee the engagement of all members, and the network's strategic priorities are chosen in two stages: first, through an initial brainstorming at which all members are given the opportunity to name the priority projects needed in their locale; second, after ample debate, the full membership votes to create a short list of key projects and the timelines for their implementation. Once those projects are identified, working groups are formed to build strategic action plans. Thanks to this participatory exercise, which is renewed at each general assembly, the network

AT LEFT: RASTOMA members pose with *SWOT Report*, vol. XII at the 2017 RASTOMA Congress in Kribi, Cameroon. © Alexis Guilleux/RASTOMA

ensures that it responds as closely as possible to the individual needs of its members and to the conservation priorities for marine turtles on the African Atlantic coasts that they collectively define. Dialogue with the RASTOMA scientific council ensures that the action plans remain in accordance with good conservation practices, current science, and larger-scale priorities.

NETWORK EXPANSION AND IMPACT AMPLIFICATION

Sea turtle stakeholders from outside RASTOMA's region manifested their interest in replicating the group's success in other West African countries to the north and west as early as 2016. However, RASTOMA wished to limit the scope of its work to Central Western Africa (roughly the coasts and waters of Cameroon and south to Democratic Republic of Congo) to best address local realities. At RASTOMA's 2017 General Assembly, the idea was born to support the emergence of a sister network that was built on similar values, governance, and participatory principles, but that was designed to serve the culturally and biologically distinct geography of the West African countries (specifically, the six countries from Nigeria east to Liberia). At a meeting held in Grand Bassam (Côte d'Ivoire) in 2018 with support from IUCN Africa, a steering committee was formed that resulted in the creation of WASTCON in 2019. WASTCON is now legally declared and engaged in refining its charter with help from RASTOMA and others.

A SEA TURTLE ACTION PLAN FOR WEST AFRICA

The Togo Congress in 2020 was an important inflection point for the emergence of a grassroots sea turtle conservation movement led by RASTOMA—and now WASTCON—with high hopes of expansion to one day ensure the proper conservation of sea turtles and their habitats along all of Africa's Atlantic coastline. Drawing on those experiences, RASTOMA supports the emergence of the North Africa Sea Turtle Network (NAST-Net), which will similarly represent the work that must take place to conserve sea turtles in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. NAST-Net held its first General Assembly in Tunis (Tunisia) in 2019. Those three civil society networks retain their respective identities but share common values that ensure an inclusive, Afrocentric vision of conservation governance led by on-the-ground stakeholders.

The next challenge is for conservationists to use this bottom-up approach to take on larger-scale sea turtle planning and conservation actions at regional and national levels. This effort has been envisioned since 1999 and was reaffirmed in 2002 and 2008 under the aegis of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS Bonn) and its "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Conservation for Marine Turtles of the Atlantic Coast of Africa." This memorandum has now been ratified by 23 African nations, but to date it has largely remained a commitment only on paper. Highly representative regional groups such as RASTOMA, WASTCON, and NAST-Net hope to serve as a driver to engage states, regional and international institutions, and donors so that this effort can move along the continuum from signatures to on-the-ground sea turtle conservation action. Much can be achieved by people working together from the ground up. •