

Section:	Arabian Environment
Published:	Sunday, July 30 - 2006 at 14:00 (GMT+4)

Strategy sought for protecting endangered sea turtles, coral reefs in the region

Region-wide cooperation in the conservation of endangered marine turtles and coral reefs in the Gulf will be the focus of a regional conference to be held in Abu Dhabi in September this year.



More than 50 environmental experts from the GCC, Iran and Yemen are expected to attend the Marine Conservation Forum, where a strategy on regional cooperation to preserve endangered marine turtles and coral reefs will be developed.

The Marine Conservation Forum, which will take place on 11 - 14 September 2006, is organized by EWS-WWF (Emirates Wildlife Society - World Wildlife Fund for Nature) under the patronage of the UAE Ministry of Environment & Water.

'Marine turtles and coral reefs play important ecological, economic, recreational and cultural roles. In the Gulf region, however, uncontrolled coastal development, destruction and alteration of turtle nesting/foraging habitats, poaching, illegal trade and pollution are having an adverse impact on these two delicate constituents of the marine ecosystem,' said Razan Al Mubarak, Director, EWS-WWF.

'The Marine Conservation Forum will provide an opportunity for specialists, biologists, conservationists, government agencies and NGO's from the Gulf, Iran and Yemen to review marine turtle and coral reef research and conservation efforts. It will also aim to assess the status of these species with the objective of creating regional conservation management initiatives and a strategic plan,' added Al Mubarak.

Elaborating on the significance of the Forum for the region, Dr. Frederic Launay, EWS-WWF Conservation, Director said, "The region's marine environment is under constant strain and both coral reef and marine turtle populations are at great risk. It is, therefore, an opportune time for EWS-WWF to hold the Marine Conservation Forum to emphasize the value of this environment and the importance of regional cooperation."

'The preservation of both marine turtles and coral reefs requires multilateral cooperation and agreements as well as commitments of governments sharing these species, to guarantee their survival. Successful development of the ecotourism sector also requires regional and multilateral cooperation,' added Dr. Launay emphasizing the need for regional cooperation in conservation efforts.

The first two days of the Marine Conservation Forum will be dedicated to coral reef conservation followed by two days of presentations focused on turtle protection. Areas of discussion over the

four days will include habitats, legal aspects, management, protected areas, population assessment, threat assessments and mitigation strategies. Local conservation efforts in each participating country will be reviewed and best practices assimilated into a Regional Conservation Action Plan.

First Gulf Bank is the main sponsor of the Marine Conservation Forum, while Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) and TOTAL are co-sponsors, with Dolphin Energy being a support sponsor of the event. The courier service provider for the event is DHL - UAE.

Notes and Media Contacts

More information on the Forum is available at <http://www.panda.org/uae/mcf>

Emirates Wildlife Society (EWS) is a national (UAE) environmental NGO established in February 2001. EWS works at the federal level and aims to promote the conservation of nature in the UAE. To achieve its goals, EWS works in association with one of the world's largest and most experienced independent conservation organizations - WWF. Together, this partnership is known as EWS-WWF.

Of the seven species of marine turtle, the Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and the Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) regularly occur in the waters of the Arabian Sea. Occasionally, the Loggerhead turtle and the Olive Ridley turtle can also be spotted. Worldwide, the Green, Loggerhead and Olive Ridley turtles are listed as Endangered, and the Hawksbill as Critically Endangered. At the local and regional levels the number of foraging habitats and nesting grounds of these species are continually declining.

Coral reefs are among the planet's richest habitats in terms of biodiversity. They are also the most vulnerable to disturbance. The health of coral systems has progressively declined in the Gulf. Those off the coast of Abu Dhabi, UAE display clear signs of resilience to frequent, unusually severe temperature fluctuations that, in recent years, caused mass mortality of corals at several locations around the world. Although they suffered damage, the Gulf corals by and large survived these thermal anomalies and, today show active signs of regeneration. However, there are many other cases throughout the Gulf where the reefs are yet to recover from these environmental stresses. EWS-WWF is working on a bi-national (UAE and Qatar) project on investigating coral reefs in the territorial waters of the two countries. The project is sponsored by Dolphin Energy.

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