

RAS SHARMA PROTECTED AREA REMAINS UNPROTECTED

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Yemen is widely touted as the last great reservoir of Arabian wildlife with Ras Sharma Protected Area being a site of supreme regional importance because of the sea turtles that nest there. Unless this area receives real protection, however, the turtles that use it may simply disappear. This would be an environmental catastrophe of the first order.



A green turtle nesting at Ras Sharma.

Ras Sharma and the adjacent beach at Jethmun in the Hadhramawt form one of the most important nesting areas for marine turtles in Arabia. Of particular importance to Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), and to a lesser extent Hawksbill Turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), these beaches are also used by Loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*). Leatherbacks (*Dermachelys coriacea*) have been reliably reported off the coast, and there have been unsubstantiated reports of Olive Ridleys (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) in the area. In the words of Khaled, one of the Yemeni soldiers who receive scant compensation as guardians of the nesting beaches, "In season they come in their thousands." While this may be an exaggeration, it is obvious from the cratered surface that many, many turtles lay their eggs here. It is for this reason that Ras Sharma was officially declared a protected area, one of four on the Yemen mainland, the others being Jebel Bura', Ottmah, and Hawf. The Socotra Archipelago Zoning Plan designates an additional 12 terrestrial and 27 marine Nature Sanctuaries with about three quarters of the islands' area declared as National Parkland. For these and other reasons, the archipelago has been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site although this nomination is by no means secure.

Yemenis claim that Ras Sharma is 'off-limits' but in my experience visiting the area unimpeded is simple. Situated about 120 kilometers east of Mukalla, the capital of the Hadhramawt, good tar roads approach to within 5 km of the site. A track passable by any car goes directly to the beach which is surrounded by a derelict and easily penetrable wall. Money has obviously been allocated for protection, but the project appears defunct.

Threats to the turtles are many. Upon my first visit in December 2006, I was surprised to see as many as a dozen Yemenis combing the beach for ghost crabs after sunset. Those that I spoke with said they were off-duty soldiers moonlighting as fishermen, and that they regularly used the beach to collect bait. Given the sensitivity of the turtles that nest on this beach, there is no doubt that many are inhibited by this human traffic. Circular tracks show where turtles have pulled U-turns, returning to the sea after having been disturbed by people walking along the coast.

The presence of these turtles is well-known, and local and foreign tourists visit Ras Sharma daily. In spite of posted regulations and a pamphlet issued by the Environment Protection Authority, many visitors don't realize how easily the turtles can be disturbed. Unchecked, curiosity seekers cause untold numbers of turtles to abort their nesting missions, and once laying commences the mothers are easily scared off the pits that they so laboriously dig in the sand. The eggs thus abandoned have absolutely no chance of hatching. Even the most sensitive and well-informed tourist, imbued with sympathy and awe, may inadvertently interrupt the nesting process.

It is possible also that human consumption of turtle meat and eggs plays a negative role in breeding success at Ras Sharma. Prior to the Unification of the two Yemens on May 22nd, 1990, many soldiers of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen trained in Cuba where they learned some Spanish and developed a taste for turtle flesh and eggs. Dead, gutted turtles are frequently found on the beach at Ras Sharma although it is unknown whether they have been butchered, or are simply victims of natural mortality.

By far the greatest threat to the turtles at Ras Sharma, however, is the pack of feral dogs that has discovered this seemingly infinite resource. Healthy canines romp on the beach, fueled by an exclusive diet of turtle eggs and hatchlings. During a visit in late October 2007, I saw a bitch with seven chubby puppies lying complacently prior to her next meal, the size and condition of her litter underscoring the richness of her diet. Dogs excavating turtle nests is a common sight at Ras Sharma and the area is littered with dark green piles of dog feces which are dense with miniature flippers.



A nest abandoned because of human disturbance.

Ras Sharma is one of the many areas of Yemen that host true wildlife spectacles. The Government of Yemen acted well in recognizing

the importance of these nesting beaches by declaring the Ras Sharma Protected Area. However, for this act to have the impact that it must, it should be followed up with concrete action and enforcement. Protecting the turtles of Ras Sharma could be relatively simple. First, a brief, humane, and inexpensive eradication campaign to eliminate the feral dogs that live there should be effected. Simultaneously, an effective barrier to impede future canine immigration and control human traffic must be erected. Funds for this could be generated with a user fee. Beaches far from the nesting area for use by bait fisherman can be designated. Finally, a well-trained staff that is empowered to regulate visitors' behavior on-site would limit the damage caused by human intrusions and prevent further canine incursions.

Ras Sharma has been used by turtles for untold millennia. Mass nesting continues in spite of disturbance by man and his animals, although the future of this miracle is by no means ensured. With the simple measures prescribed above, and a minimum of will and enforcement, the turtles of Sharma may enjoy a secure future for untold millennia to come.



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Dog faeces dense with turtle hatchling remains at Ras Sharma

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