

TURTLES ALL THE WAY

A PROJECT THAT ENLISTS THE HELP OF BRITISH MARINE BIOLOGIST WARREN BAVERSTOCK IS REVERSING THE SEA TURTLE DECLINE IN THE ARABIAN GULF AND SERVING AS A MODEL FOR OTHER AREAS. JULIA HORTON INVESTIGATES

The Burj Al Arab's vast white sail-shaped silhouette on the Dubai coastline is an unmissable homage to the region's rich seafaring heritage. But this iconic hotel hides an unexpected and more important oceanic feature which is helping to protect wildlife in the Arabian Gulf and beyond. The aquarium in the hotel's Al Mahara Restaurant might appear to be just another extravagant display of opulence to impress diners – but it is in fact linked to a growing project at the hotel, combating a deadly threat to one of the oldest and most mysterious marine animals.

The world's sea turtles have been brought to the brink of extinction through a fatal combination of persecution, ignorance and accident.

All seven remaining species of sea turtle are on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List for endangered species. Hawksbills are among the most at risk, categorised as critically endangered after numbers of nesting females dropped by almost 90 per cent in three generations, leaving under 10,000 worldwide. The world's oldest research and conservation group, the Sea Turtle Conservancy, warns that without greater action it may not be long before sea turtles become an 'odddity' found only in aquariums or natural history museums.

Back at the Burj and its sister hotel, the Madinat Jumeirah, the Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project (DTRP) is aimed at ensuring that does not happen. Launched in 2004 with the Dubai municipality Wildlife Protection Office, the project has successfully rescued, rehabilitated and released more than 600 sea turtles. The Burj's indoor fish quarantine facilities were transformed into an intensive care recovery centre for turtles, away from the public, where vets provide medicine and carry out surgery including amputations.

Once out of danger, turtles are transferred to a large enclosure at the Madinat Jumeirah at Mina A'Salam where staff monitor their feeding and weight to make sure they are ready to be returned to the wild. It is here that hotel guests and local people can view the turtles in a special outdoor pre-release holding pen built in the waterways outside the hotel. The project is the only one of its kind in the region and has drawn growing interest among famous visitors, including tennis ace Novak Djokovic.

Meanwhile British marine biologist Warren Baverstock, who runs the project, is attracting global media attention for his conservation work and underwater photography. On his website, promotional footage showing guests on a luxury pleasure craft releasing young turtles into the ocean is backed by the Mission Impossible theme tune.

It sounds a little cringeworthy, but sadly, in reality the song title is apt given the turtles' plight. Although well-designed for life at sea with strong flippers and good underwater vision, their future depends on the land where every sea turtle starts out as a tiny, vulnerable hatchling on a beach. Females generally return to the place where they were born to nest. Out of the water, they are slower and short-sighted, making them easy prey for the illegal trade in turtle eggs, meat and shells, which are used to make jewellery and ornaments.

The biggest threats to turtles in the region are ingesting or getting entangled in fishing gear and litter, including cigarette ends left on beaches, collisions with speedboats and jet skis and degradation of habitat. Turtles favour tropical or subtropical waters and young hawksbills are badly hit by the cold, with many being washed up along the Gulf coastline during the winter where they are found by locals, tourists and environmentalists who alert the Burj. Although turtles are protected by law in the UAE, such provision is rare in the Middle East. Explaining the lasting need for the sanctuary since it was established, Warren says: "The turtles' plight at that time was no different to what it is now..."

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“There was a need for a turtle rehabilitation centre and with the aquarium facilities and professional management team available at the Burj Al Arab, and the perfect rehabilitation and education facility, it was an opportunity which was recognised and taken.” Turtles can take anything from two months to more than two years to recover at the centre. Some suffering from neurological problems, missing limbs or blindness are never set free because experts believe they are unlikely to be able to survive in the wild. Their presence serves as a stark reminder to visitors of the lasting threats.

Raising awareness of the dangers the turtles face and how people can help is a key part of the project, with Warren and the team giving talks twice a week for guests and locals. Each year, around 1,000 pupils from schools across Dubai visit the project to learn about turtle biology,

Gulf ecology and how they can help. Warren credits the rise in the number of turtles brought to the sanctuary each year, up from around 30 on average to several hundred, to this educational programme, which began in 2006.

The project is also helping the international turtle conservation effort through satellite tagging which allows staff to see where released creatures end up. By far the longest journey to date was made by a green sea turtle named Dibba, who was tracked all the way from the Gulf to Thailand after her release in 2008. Her 8600km journey was the first recorded example of a marine turtle migrating from the Middle East to South East Asia and the second longest sea turtle journey on record. The epic distance highlighted the lasting mysteries surrounding turtle behaviour and the need for wider monitoring to identify and protect their feeding, breeding and nesting grounds. In total, 11 turtles released by the project have had satellite tags fitted and the Jumeirah hotel group plans to fund more. Data from Dibba’s tag also pushed home the importance of international collaboration to ensure the turtles’ survival. Over the past three, years

staff from the DTRP have helped to train conservationists in countries from Indonesia to Kenya.

Arguably the Burj aquarium is actually more famous as the site of a chance breakthrough in world understanding of zebra sharks after a female named Zebedee stunned Warren by laying fertile eggs – despite the absence of a male zebra shark. The revelation that the sharks were capable of reproducing through parthenogenesis brought Warren and his team to global attention after they wrote a key scientific paper.

Only time will tell whether sea turtles will survive. Last summer (2012) fuelled hopes as the project held its largest sea turtle release to date with 151 critically endangered juvenile hawksbill sea turtles set free by an equal number of invited children. “You can imagine the excitement,” Warren recalls. “The whole crowd cheered in support as the small turtles made their way back down to the sea, which for me is what it is all about.”