

Turtle Conservation, Greece

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This summer, I was awarded a Faculty International Mobility Award which allowed me to volunteer in Kefalonia, Greece with the wildlife conservation company 'Wildlife Sense'. The company focuses on understanding the interactions between turtles in the harbour, both with other turtles and people (tourists, fishermen and locals) and also protects and conserves turtle nests to ensure an 80% hatch rate of found nests.

To do this, there were many early morning starts (5am) and many long bike rides, but it was all worth it when a nest of turtle eggs was found. The organisation protects 11 beaches around the coast of Kefalonia,



Figure 2: Barb, the blue paint is from her rubbing on the fishing boats in the harbour



Figure 1: Me with a nest of turtle eggs found on the beach before relocating them to a safer place along the beach.

which volunteers would bike to and walk early morning before any people are around. This ensures a nest is found and protected before the beach is disturbed by people. What an amazing experience, to see the sun rise and feel the ocean on your feet at the crack of dawn, something I have never felt before, and even more thrilling when a

nest was found and I knew I had a responsibility for helping and protecting the population of turtles in Kefalonia. I was also responsible for sleeping on the beach a few times during my stay to ensure if any hatchlings hatched, they could get to the sea safely, without being affected by light pollution.

It was also required to spot and mark turtle appearances at the harbour, which was important to establish the numbers and sexes of turtles coming in and out of the harbour daily. It was common for certain turtles to be seen every day. For example, Barb (See pic), who was a favourite of the fishermen. This is important as turtles are typically solitary animals and not a lot is known about how they act in groups, so watching and recording their behaviour allows understanding of how they act and what may affect them in this

unusual environment. Another important role was to educate and intervene with tourists feeding the turtles fish, as this is not natural to their diet and can cause health issues. One of the biggest problems affecting the turtles in Kefalonia is the locals fishing from the harbour (which is illegal) but the port police struggle to control it which means that there are many turtle injuries – at least one a week – relating to entanglement or limb damage due to fishing line. However, since leaving, I have been informed people. Have taken a stance against it and hopefully it will come to a halt and the turtles residing in the harbour will be safe again.

During tagging events - one of the most exciting times of the week - a qualified diver who was part of the company would catch untagged turtles in the harbour and bring them onto land to perform a health check and tag the turtle. This was an amazing event and some people were even able to get involved; scraping barnacles off the turtle's shell, measuring its carapace and recording the data.

Personally, I would love to go into a career in conservation, therefore this trip is a great starting point in helping to understand what my life could be like in the future and has only fuelled my want for a career in this field further. During my time with wildlife sense, I made a group of amazing friends who I still keep in touch with every day and have made amazing memories with that I would not have otherwise made. The whole experience was a big step for me, going to another country alone and spending two weeks with not only people I know nothing about but also, doing something I did not know a lot about, but the organisation was so helpful and ensured everyone was okay and learning. The field leader, Simon, even sat down with me on multiple occasions just to talk about turtles and our love of them. I even got to go on an emergency hatchling rescue one night when there was a possibility of the nests flooding due to a storm. To watch lightening on a beach while in pure panic trying to rescue tiny eggs is surely a once in a life time experience and I'm so glad I was given the opportunity to do so.



Figure 4: Chip, he is called this because of the chip at the back of his carapace



Figure 3: A hatchling on Megali Amos Beach