

Marine turtles have existed on earth for over 150 million years. Of the seven species of marine turtles, six – the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), green (*Chelonia mydas*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) and flatback (*Natator depressus*) turtles – are still commonly found in Southeast Asian waters. All are highly migratory, often passing through territorial and international waters from feeding to nesting grounds and back again.

More than ten years ago, marine turtle populations were widely reported to be in decline. The many reasons for this decline included by-catch or accidental capture, habitat loss and degradation in areas that served as nesting, foraging and resting habitats, including beaches, seagrass beds, and coral reefs, and the unsustainable utilization of natural resources by coastal communities in many parts of the world for traditional use or trade reasons.

Currently, marine turtle conservation is an issue of much interest to the world of natural conservation. Many countries are facing problems in conserving marine turtles, and marine turtle populations have continued to decline even though various conservation efforts and approaches have been attempted.

Many approaches to protecting marine turtles have been tried worldwide. Research supported by tagging, hatchery management for stock enhancement, awareness building campaigns are some of them. In the fisheries sector, one way for fishermen to take part is to use modified fishing gear that avoids harming marine turtles during their fishing operations.

## 2006 - the Year of the Turtle

Presently, the global trend is towards promoting the use of fishery resources and responsible fishing that does not have an impact on marine turtles. SEAFDEC is one organization that promotes responsible fishing and marine turtle conservation. The Indian Ocean and South-East Asia (IOSEA) Marine Turtle Memorandum of Understanding is an intergovernmental agreement that aims to protect, conserve, replenish and recover marine turtles and their habitats of the Indian

Ocean and South-East Asian regions, working in partnership with other relevant actors and organisations. The IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU Secretariat is co-located at SEAFDEC and at the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (UNEP/ROAP) in Bangkok, Thailand. The two organizations have declared that 2006 is the Year of the Turtle. The theme of the campaign is "Cooperating to Conserve Marine Turtle - our Ocean's Ambassadors".



IOSEA Year of the Turtle-2006 poster



# SEAFDEC and the Year of the (Marine) Turtle

# 2006

Bundit Chokesanguan and Panitnard Weerawat





The Year of the Turtle has five separate objectives that shape the activities that countries across the region are conducting throughout the year:

- Celebrate marine turtles in our countries - organise and host events that celebrate marine turtles, and help raise awareness and funds for their conservation
- Ensure a future - put in place and apply best practices that ensure the long-term survival of turtles, while benefiting local communities
- Save marine turtle habitats - identify sites that are important for turtles in our countries and lobby for their inclusion in the IOSEA site network
- Reduce turtle mortality - actively promote policies and technologies that reduce the accidental death of marine turtles
- Study our turtles - support or take part in ongoing research, such as surveys, tagging or satellite tracking.

### SEAFDEC Marine Turtles Projects

Celebrating the Year of the Turtle 2006, three SEAFDEC projects relate to marine turtles. The projects are on stock enhancement of marine turtles, on responsible fishing technologies and practices ('Fisheries in Harmony with Nature'), and on capacity building in the region to address international trade related issues. The projects are being carried out in collaboration with SEAFDEC member countries.



## Research for stock enhancement of marine turtle

This project aims to:

- Identify green turtles population in the Southeast Asia as well as their stock sizes;
- Determine green turtles' migration patterns, and the location of foraging habitats;
- Report on the feasibility of a 'head-starting' technique to increase the survival of sea turtle. 'Head-starting' is a technical term which means to take care of young and small turtles for some time after the hatchery stage, until they become strong enough to be released in the wild.

## Responsible fishing technologies and practices (Fisheries in Harmony with Nature)

Part of the activities in this project relates to marine turtles:

- An assessment exercise to evaluate the lessons learned from the introduction and promotion of Turtle Excluding Devices (TEDs) in SEAFDEC member countries
- Human capacity building on responsible fishing technologies and practices via demonstrations and training on fishing gear selectivity and devices, including environmentally friendly and user friendly fishing gear that avoids marine turtle by-catch
- Production and dissemination of information packages on TEDs and marine turtle conservation, including video CDs, t-shirts and souvenirs.

## Capacity building in the region to address international trade related issues

This project's objectives include reviewing international issues related to fish trade and the environment that may have a potentially negative impact on the sustainability of fisheries in the region. It also aims to provide a forum for member countries to discuss and clarify approaches towards ensuring a sustainable fish trade in the region in response to emerging international issues (including fisheries subsidies, CITES, eco-labelling and marine turtles) and preparing appropriate common policy options among ASEAN-SEAFDEC member countries.

## Conclusion

SEAFDEC is an regional organization that has a mandate to promote sustainable fisheries in the region, including the management and conservation of fisheries resources such as fish and marine turtles. In the past, SEAFDEC projects gave importance to the conservation of marine turtles and to the promotion of means for fishermen to avoid marine turtle by-catch, such as by using TEDs with trawl nets. SEAFDEC has also a long history of involvement in marine turtle breeding and release to the sea. All of these are our duty as a regional organization. SEAFDEC's commitment to and direct involvement in increasing marine turtle populations will continue long beyond the Year of the Turtle, as projects and research will be ongoing for at least the next five years.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Bundit Chokesanguan** is the head of Information and Extension Division at SEAFDEC Training Department, Samut Prakarn, Thailand. His field of interest is with fishing gear technologies. Please forward your comments to Bundit Chokesanguan at [bundit@seafdec.org](mailto:bundit@seafdec.org)

**Panitnard Weerawat** works at SEAFDEC/TD, Samut Prakan, Thailand. Her educational background is Ecological Marine Management. Please send your comments to [panitnard@seafdec.org](mailto:panitnard@seafdec.org)