



Editor's Note

The Forest and the Trees

At a remote lodge nestled in a patch of verdant tropical rainforest overlooking the Gulf of Guinea on the island of São Tomé, experts from a handful of African countries assembled in June 2016 to consolidate their efforts to conserve sea turtles and their habitats. In talks and roundtable discussions—as well as over meals and cocktails; during beach walks; and in late night conversations in French, Portuguese, Spanish, English, and local languages—the motivated and energetic group members told stories of their research and observations. They also drew conclusions, formulated strategies, and brainstormed ways through which their nonprofit, government, university, and community partners could better and more urgently protect the nature they love and achieve greater synergy through cooperation.

A suggestion arose from the group: “Let’s combine our data and produce a regional overview and maps of biogeography for Central Africa”—similar to what some had seen for South America in *SWOT Report*, vol. XI, just a few months earlier. “Can we do it?” asked one group member. “Why not try?” replied another. “Why stop with our region? What about the rest of West Africa?” said a third. And finally, someone said, “Hey, I can make some calls and engage sea turtle folks from southern and eastern Africa and the southwest Indian Ocean too. So let’s make it happen for all of Africa!”

Thus began a fast-paced effort to rally support for and recruit the contributions of people dedicated to understanding and protecting African sea turtles from more than 30 countries and territories. The culmination of their collaboration can be found on pages 14–29 of this volume in the special feature “The Sea Turtles of Africa,” which contains the first comprehensive maps of sea turtle biogeography for the African continent and a region-by-region overview of the sea turtle situation in Africa. Other articles in this volume touch on recent sea turtle research and conservation efforts, as well as on threats to turtles ranging from beach armoring to industrial spills, coastal development, shell trade, and more. As always, we hope these pages will inspire and be useful to all sea turtle conservationists regardless of where they are and what issues they work on.

The experiment in cooperation among African turtle conservationists that is presented herein is a powerful example of how data sharing can help us all to see the forest and the trees at once. Only when local scale data are shared and combined can we begin to see broader regional and global patterns that would not have been visible from our individual perspectives.

We are grateful to all of SWOT’s data contributors worldwide who form the “droplets” of knowledge, energy, and enthusiasm that help our community manifest as an “ocean”-sized force for conservation.

Thank you all,

Roderic B. Mast

Loggerhead hatchlings being held for release in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
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