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**Conservationists join forces to protect endangered sea**

**turtles in Monastir**

(TAP/ Ahmed Gaddeh)- The coastal governorate of Monastir is renowned for its stunning coastline, pristine beaches and thriving marine ecosystem. Among its many inhabitants, sea turtles hold a special place in the hearts of many locals and visitors alike. These ancient creatures have been part of the Mediterranean's rich biodiversity for millions of years, and their presence continues to play an important role in maintaining the delicate balance of the ecosystem.

There are seven species of sea turtle in the world, including three in the Mediterranean, which have been observed in the waters around Monastir.

They are the leatherback turtle (Dermochelyscoriacea), the green turtle (Cheloniamydas) and the loggerhead turtle, also known as Carettacaretta. All of these species are listed as threatened or endangered, with populations at risk from a variety of factors, including human impact and environmental degradation.

The most common sea turtle species found in the area is Carettacaretta, which is critically endangered worldwide. Loggerhead turtles are the largest of the hard-shelled sea turtles and are easily recognised by their massive head and powerful jaws.

Monastir, and in particular the island of Kuriat, is a favourable environment for the nesting of this particular species. The nearest permanent nesting site for these turtles is thousands of kilometres to the east, in Libya, according to experts.

Sea turtles are important to the Mediterranean ecosystem for several reasons. They play a crucial role in maintaining the balance of the food chain, providing a source of food for other marine species such as predatory fish and birds, and feeding on jellyfish, sea grass and other organisms that would otherwise overrun the ecosystem if left unchecked.

Researcher MalekChaarana told TAP that jellyfish populations have flourished in recent years. "The Mediterranean has become a favourable environment for jellyfish to proliferate as a result of the decline in sea turtles and also because of pollution. Jellyfish are more efficient at resisting pollution than other sea creatures," said Chaarana, who is also an eco-guardian with the Notre Grand Bleu organisation, which works to protect sea turtles in Tunisia.

The presence of sea turtles in the Mediterranean is also crucial because they help regulate the temperature and salinity of the sea. The turtles swim long distances between their nesting and feeding grounds, helping to distribute nutrients and oxygen throughout the ocean. This in turn supports the growth and survival of other marine organisms.

Sea turtles are also an important part of the cultural heritage of many coastal communities, including Monastir. These creatures have been revered for centuries as symbols of good luck and fortune, and their presence is an important part of local identity. They are also a major tourist attraction, with many visitors coming to Monastir specifically to see the turtles in their natural habitat.

In this regard, the local delegate for tourism, Faouez Ben Halima, cited joint activities with civil society to raise awareness, while benefiting from the presence of these species to promote the tourism sector. "After treating injured and sick sea turtles, the Tourism authority organises turtle releases in hotels in the region to involve tourists in these events and promote the sector."

Despite their importance to the ecosystem and the local community, sea turtle populations in Monastir and across the Mediterranean face many challenges. One of the biggest threats to the species is the loss of nesting habitats.

Fortunately, the uninhabited Kuriat Island in Monastir is entirely reserved for their nesting. Civil society activists, researchers and local authorities have unanimously agreed that the island should be cleared of all tourists and human presence at nightfall to give the shelled creatures the natural environment they need.

The island will only be open to tourists from 9am to 5pm during the summer season, Ben Halima told TAP. "This decision was taken to allow the turtles to come out and lay their eggs without being disturbed by lights and human presence."

Another major threat to sea turtles in Monastir is fishing gear and plastic pollution. Sea turtles are often accidentally caught in fishing gear, resulting in injury or death. In addition, plastic waste thrown into the sea can be mistaken for food by the turtles, damaging their digestive systems, according to Hamdi El Hamzaoui, environmental officer at Notre Grand Bleu. "This plastic pollution can also damage their habitats and upset the delicate balance of the ecosystem," he added.

Notre Grand Bleu works to protect and conserve sea turtles and their habitats. Its activities are dedicated to the protection and conservation of sea turtles, providing education and outreach programmes to raise awareness of the importance of these species.

"We regularly organise awareness-raising programmes for the public, especially fishermen's children, as well as for decision-makers and journalists," said El Hamzaoui.

These creatures play an important role in maintaining the delicate balance of the Mediterranean ecosystem and are an important part of the local community's cultural heritage.

Despite the many challenges they face, these flippers in the waves continue to capture the hearts of those who encounter them, serving as many inspiring examples of resilience and survival in the face of adversity.

The organisation insists on the collective responsibility to protect and conserve these species and to ensure that future generations have the opportunity to experience their beauty and majesty in the wild.

This requires ongoing education and awareness campaigns, as well as concrete action to reduce human impact on their habitats and mitigate the threats posed by fishing gear and plastic pollution.

"By working together and taking a multidisciplinary approach, we can ensure that sea turtles in Monastir and the Mediterranean continue to thrive for generations to come, as they have since the dawn of time, and that their vital role in the ecosystem is recognised and valued by all."

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