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NOTE

LOSS OF CRITICALLY ENDANGERED HAWKSBILL TURTLE NESTING BEACH AT EGA FACILITY, ABU DHABI, UAE

D. Adhavan

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Loss of Critically Endangered Hawksbill Turtle nesting beach at EGA facility, Abu Dhabi, UAE

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The nesting beaches are critical resources for sea turtles, most beaches around the world are disturbed by natural pressures and direct or indirect human influence. EGA (Emirates Global Aluminium) beach, a stretch of ~0.64km length and an average breadth of 165m, located between 24.800°N, 54.702°E and 24.804°N, 54.705°E has historically been visited by Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* and used extensively for nesting (EAD 2016; Sharma 2018). A rapid survey was carried out at the EGA beach during low tide on 5 February 2019 to document the possibilities of sea turtle nesting, as a part of the environmental and ecological monitoring survey of Abu Dhabi ports, 2019. There were no signs of sea turtle nesting observed during the survey, however, the nesting and crawl-marks were well documented in our previous surveys from 2012 to 2017. According to the discussion with the local environmental surveyors, EGA points to the fact that Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* were the species visiting the EGA beach, which was corroborated by the dimensions of the observed crawl-marks during 2012 to 2017. During the survey, three old sea turtle nests (Image 1a–c) of 2016–2017 were recorded and it was marked and protected

with fishing cages by the EGA environmental team. Further, a reconnaissance survey was carried out in the entire EGA beach area (~0.64km) to record the trail of sea turtle nesting. This survey revealed there were no recent traces of sea turtle in the beach area. It was found that the beach is not any more conducive for sea turtle nesting as the shoreline was completely covered with mounds of dead seagrasses (Image 1d,e) which would restrict the access of sea turtle to the beach. In addition, the hatchlings must be able to return to the sea and the nest must not have any visual obstructions (Godfrey & Barreto 1995). Debris on the beach would also prevent successful nesting as the beach was completely covered with fragments including plastic and oyster shells (Image 1f–h). This sometimes causes a phenomenon called 'false crawl' where the females emerge from the water but do not lay eggs (Fujisaki & Lamont 2016) due to unfavorable conditions. There was one 'false crawl' (Image 1i) and one nest recorded during 2017, and this was the last evidence of sea turtles on EGA beach. Since then, there has been no nesting or crawl signs recorded. Additionally, artificial lighting from the industries might also have a negative impact on the nesting processes

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Image 1. a–c—old sea turtle nesting spots | d–e—dead seagrass mounds | f–h—debris including plastic and oyster shells | i—false crawl. © D. Adhavan.

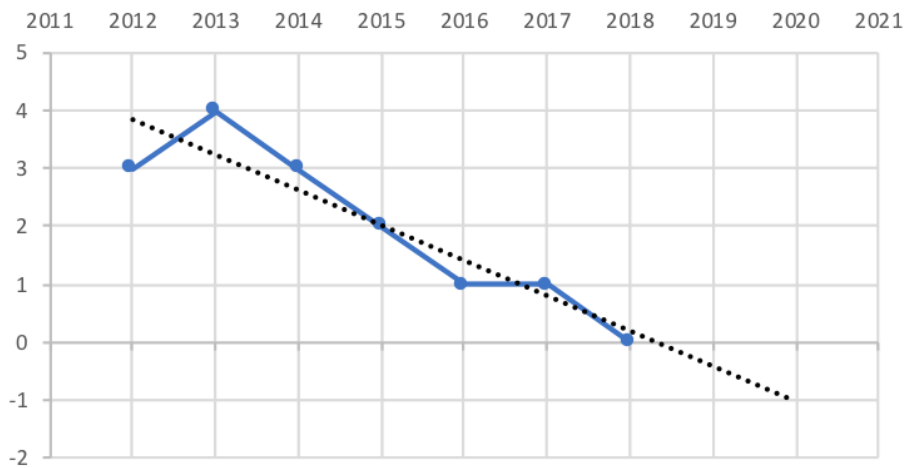


Figure 1. Graphical representation of sea turtle nesting trend from 2012 to 2018.

of nesting females (Weishampel et al. 2016). With reference to that, a set of scientists worked closely with the community to minimize disturbance to nesting

females by avoiding bright lights and loud noise in the nesting area (Gulf News 2017). The turtle nesting status was comparatively reduced from 2016 onwards (Marine

Ecological Monitoring Project Survey (2012–2018). The trend of nesting status from 2012 to 2018 is graphically shown in Figure 1. It is also predicted, if there is no aid to protect the sea turtle nesting beaches, this magnitude of beach loss could literally be the point of no return for the nesting populations of the sea turtles to EGA beach. This would eventually affect seagrass meadows and coral reefs, and in turn, there would be an impact on the marine ecosystem.

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