

Former poachers guard Cabo Verde's endangered sea turtles

- *Conservation organizations are employing Cabo Verdeans, who formerly hunted endangered and threatened sea turtles, as rangers who now monitor and patrol beaches.*
- *From 2007-24, illegal catches of female turtles on one island plummeted from 1,253 to a mere 20, while nesting sites of vulnerable loggerhead turtles increased sevenfold, according to data by a conservation NGO.*
- *Locals traditionally consume turtle parts, use them in traditional medicine and now sell them in black markets; however, conservation activities, legislation and tourism have led to a reduction in turtle harvesting, researchers say.*
- *Conservationists say threats persist for sea turtles from at-sea captures, industrial fishing and plastic pollution, and that stricter laws and increased participation of the fisher community in conservation activities are needed.*

Seven years into patrolling on Cabo Verde's islands, Roni Nelson Batista Ramos now protects endangered sea turtles on the beaches where he once poached them.

A few decades ago, he hunted sea turtles to feed his family, he says, since consuming turtle meat was a common practice among locals on his island. Back then, all he did was hunt turtles, and it was free food on the table, Ramos tells Mongabay. However, after stricter conservation efforts and new [legislation](#) that criminalized killing threatened turtle species, poaching activities [plummeted](#) in the country. Many poachers were fined and struggled to adapt to a new life.

"I had turtle meat for personal consumption and never realized I could make a living out of conserving them," he says. "But now, I guard them against the poachers, and it's motivating to see how these efforts have driven positive impacts for their conservation."

Ramos is among about a dozen former poachers who have been employed by conservation organizations to keep poaching numbers low on the country's beaches. According to the Turtle Foundation, illegal catches of female turtles on the island of Boa Vista have declined from 1,253 in 2007 to just 20 in 2024. Meanwhile, in the same period, loggerhead turtle nests on the island increased more than sevenfold.



Rangers find a sea turtle on the Lacacão beach during a morning census. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.



A ranger measuring a turtle's shell and collecting data at the Canto camp. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.

Euclides Resende, managing director of Turtle Foundation, a conservation NGO involved in these patrols, says the drop in poaching, which feeds an illegal trade in turtle parts, is the outcome of “collective efforts by ranger-led patrols, fused with technology, that engages local people by creating jobs.” Researchers also [note](#) that other factors, such as increased local employment in turtle-watching tourism, play a role.

However, away from the patrolled beaches, at-sea captures of turtles by fishers, who consumed or sold them, remained constant and their market value went up between 2008 and 2019, suggests a [study](#) published in *Fish Biology and Fisheries*.

The nesting population of loggerhead turtles in Cabo Verde is the [third-largest](#) in the world, after Oman and southeast Florida. Marine biologists estimate that approximately [two-thirds](#) of the nesting activity on Cabo Verde takes place on the island of Boa Vista.

Back at the sandy beaches of the island, Ramos patrols and supervises fellow rangers during the hatching season when loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) swim ashore to lay eggs [from June to October](#). His team set up five camps across the island where they patrol around 31 kilometers (19 miles) of land on foot.

When the turtles visit at night to lay their eggs, rangers must stay vigilant around the clock.

“I cover at least 4-km [2.5-mi] walking patrols every night during the peak season. When we [rangers] spot a turtle, we inspect and record them, check their tags and tag them if they are untagged,” Ramos, also a camp coordinator at [Turtle Foundation](#), tells Mongabay.



The hatching season when loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) swim ashore to lay eggs is from June to October. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.

The turtle trade

Among the seven species of sea turtles, [five species](#) nest on Cabo Verde's islands, such as the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) and hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), all of which are listed as [endangered or vulnerable](#) by the IUCN, the global conservation authority. The loggerhead turtle, for example, [comes ashore](#) every 2-3 years during the hatching season to lay her eggs under the cover of sandy beaches.

But as the turtles come ashore at night, so do the poachers. While Ramos previously hunted turtles to directly feed his family, sources say that hunting also supplies several black markets that [trade](#) the meat for human consumption or traditional medicine.

“Other turtle parts [don’t] have a higher demand than its meat, which sells for about 3-7 euros [\$3.40-\$8] per kilogram [2.2 pounds] in the black market,” says Herculano Dinis, executive director at [Associação Projecto Vitó](#), another turtle conservation NGO involved in patrols.



Rangers find a sea turtle with its flippers cut off. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.

However, Resende estimates the price can go up to 12 euros (\$13.70) per kg, depending on the buyer and seller. “This is a part of both local and international trade, as reports show it is exported to countries like the U.S. and France.”

A few ongoing legal cases not seen by Mongabay indicate that the turtle meat is not only sold across the islands but also in the U.S., Dinis says. People also driving the demand for turtle meat are Cabo Verdean emigrants who fly into the island for holidays from countries like the U.S, he says.

“This is a big incentive for local people to poach sea turtles to deliver the meat on demand to these emigrants or sell them in the black market,” he tells Mongabay.

Although laws exist to protect turtles, and poaching has decreased, current legislation is not always an effective deterrent, says Emilio Garcia Landin, a drone pilot at the Turtle Foundation.

He says there are high poaching trends in the northern part of the country and that poachers are likely to return even after they are caught. “There are fines and imprisonments for turtle poaching, but the poachers mostly escape paying fines,” Landin says.

Although several NGOs involve local people in monitoring and patrolling areas to detect poaching activities, gaps in law enforcement when poachers are caught stand as a key challenge, says Samir Tavares Martins, biologist and founding member of [BIOS.CV](#), a conservation and sustainable development association in Cabo Verde.

He also says he [doubts that poverty plays a role](#) in why locals eat turtles today. The use of the species’ parts for [food and traditional medicine](#) is an old tradition in coastal communities in West Africa.

“Active patrols and activities led by the NGOs have made a dent in the poaching problem, but given that the demand for meat is high among the emigrants, I think people who poach them may do it for easy income,” he says. “No amount of fines or punishment can deter some poachers who illegally hunt for pleasure and extra money. So, it’s crucial to build strict laws, stronger collaboration with NGOs and constant awareness of conservation that could help encourage behavioral shifts.”



Rangers use dogs in training to detect poached turtles. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation

Facing looming threats

Occasionally, poachers are aware of the timing of patrols, allowing them to determine when to approach turtles and nests. While rangers still patrol at night to deter poachers, the Turtle Foundation also established a dog and drone team in 2018, utilizing thermal and night-vision drones to enhance beach patrols.

“Drones in such cases help track poachers easily while securing rangers from any threats posed by the poachers,” Dinis says.

Apart from poaching and looming threats from [urbanization](#), [climate change](#), [plastic pollution](#) and industrial fishing, he explains, bycatch poses a major threat to sea turtles. He says these threats could intensify with the EU and Cabo Verde renewing the [Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement \(SFPA\)](#), which allows 56 fishing vessels from EU member states to fish in Cabo Verde for five years as part of efforts to industrialize the sector.

While sustainable fisheries management is part of the agreement and Cabo Verde tries to implement [initiatives](#) to conserve its marine protected areas, Dinis says the SFPA could have a huge impact on marine species, including the endangered sea turtles and species of sharks and rays, which are already facing impacts from bycatch and industrial fishing.

Under the SFPA’s protocols, there might be a possibility of certain economic gains, he says, “But if we risk losing the biodiversity that makes up the marine ecosystem, the sea and thousands of lives that depend on it will never be the same.”

Amid growing threats, Martins also says that increasing job security for local people could be part of the solution, while [educating and empowering](#) the local fishing community.

“Involving the fisher community is crucial,” he tells Mongabay, “because a lot of the information or alerts gathered on poaching activities and industrial fishing come from their local knowledge and observation.”



Boa Esperança Camp. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.

Banner image: A loggerhead hatchling in Boa vista. Image courtesy of The Turtle Foundation.

Citations:

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