Additional Records of Leatherback Turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) from Syria

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Leatherback turtles are globally classified as Vulnerable on the Red list of threatened species (Wallace et al. 2013). They are the third most common sea turtle species in the Mediterranean Sea, after loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) and green turtles (*Chelonia mydas).* However, unlike the latter two species, the leatherback is not known to breed in the region and is thought to enter the Mediterranean only to feed as larger individuals (Casale et al. 2018).

Distribution of records of leatherbacks across the region was reviewed almost two decades ago (Casale et al. 2003) and this was closely followed by publication of a record of a leatherback in Syria (Rees et al. 2004), which was the first for the country. The recent IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group Region Report (Casale et al 2021) presents a host of new records of leatherback turtles from around the Mediterranean, in individual country-chapters and should be used as a source for most up-to-date presence information. A synthesis of observations of leatherbacks has not been carried out since 2003. However, based on some of the available literature, leatherbacks are known to occur from the Gibraltar Strait (their point of entry into the Mediterranean) to the Levant (e.g., Israel; Levy et al 2005). To date there have only been ten published records of leatherbacks found along the extensive Turkish coastline (reviewed by Candan and Canbolat 2018; with an additional record in Roden et al. 2017). This low level of encounter contrasts with observation rates from Tunisia, where over 50 observations were already recorded by 2011 (Karaa et al. 2013), supporting suggestions that leatherback distribution is not even across the region and some sites more important than others (e.g., Casale et al 2003, Lazar et al. 2008). It is interesting to note that origins for two of the turtles observed in Turkey have been determined. One was an adult female observed nesting in Trinidad (Sönmez et al. 2008) and the other a male turtle from French Guiana (Roden et al. 2017), thus highlighting the link between the Mediterranean and western Atlantic populations.

This current note adds further unpublished records of the presence of leatherback turtles in Syria, to complement those published to date from other countries, making the data available for researchers that may want to look deeper into the presence and ecology and of this remarkable reptile within the Mediterranean. We present three new records of leatherback turtles observed between 2000 to 2011. One of these was bycaught and released alive and the remaining two were observed stranded dead along the coast. Full details of available information on all four Syrian leatherbacks are presented to simplify data access (Table 1; Fig. 1).

There is much still to learn about leatherbacks in the Mediterranean, such as their abundance, distribution, and source populations. Such information when combined with a systematic analysis of threats will enable identification of likely hotspots where regulation of fishing may reduce the impacts of bycatch. This may be important since the likely source population of leatherback turtles is declining and is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red list (TNALWG 2019).

Table 1. Records of leatherback turtles observed in Syria, 2000-2011. CCL = curved carapace length (cm).

#	Date	Location	Lat	Lon	Status	Size (CCL) in cm	Provenance	Origin
1	??/07/00	Lattakia	~35.49	~35.80	Live	~150	Caught in a trammel net in front of the Al-Kabeer River. Taken to Al-Kassab port (near Lattakia). Released alive.	This Study
2	04/08/04	Jablah	~35.36	~35.89	Live	~140	The turtle's front left flipper had become entangled in the ropes of a trammel net about 2.5km offshore. Taken to Jablah Port and released alive.	Rees et al. 2004
3	15/06/08	Basaa (south Lattakia)	35.49	35.82	dead	~130	Stranded, dead	This Study
4	29/12/11	Snaoubar (south Lattakia)	~35.42	~35.90	dead	~125	Stranded, dead	This Study

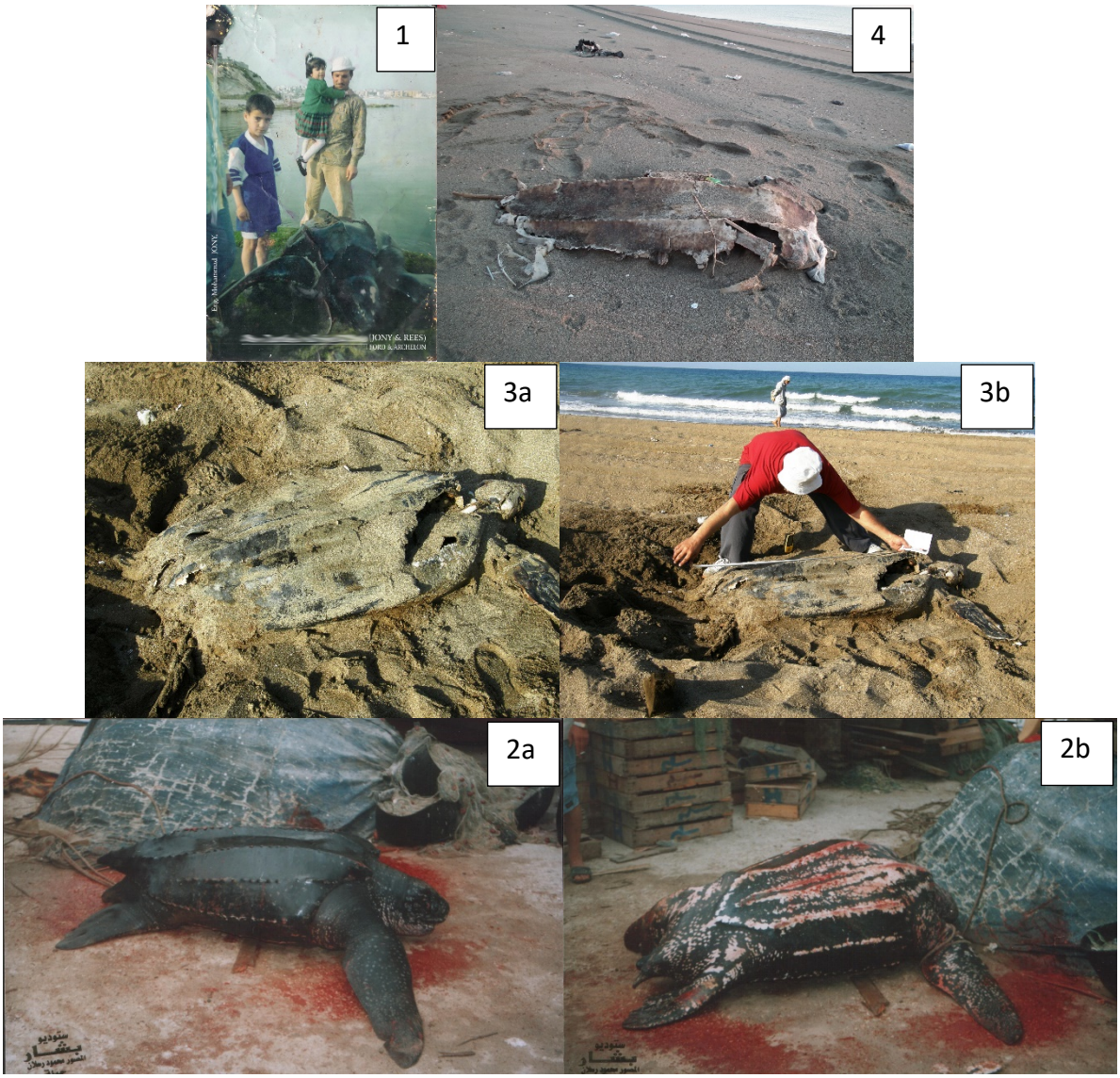

Figure 1. Images of leatherback turtles observed in Syria, 2000-2011. Images labelled with turtle numbers as per Table 1.

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