

ARTICLES

The Birth of ARCHELON – A Personal Account

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In November 2023, ARCHELON completed 40 years of active life. Its initial name, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece (STPS), expressed appropriately its major scope, the conservation of sea turtles in Greece. For the occasion of this 40-year anniversary, I outline in this article how STPS was created and its struggle to survive the first years of its life.

To perceive better the context of the Society's birth, it is necessary to describe the conditions regarding nature conservation in Greece at the time. I shall attempt this by describing my personal experiences. Since my young age, I was involved in the boy scouts and later in the Alpine Club and I believe that through these associations I became very fond of nature. I had also subscribed to the National Geographic magazine and received by post this excellent monthly periodical. Later on, I joined the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature

(HSPN), the oldest nature-conservation organization in Greece, and had the chance to visit several exquisite parts of the Greek countryside and to admire its extensive biodiversity.

In summer 1977, while camping with my family in Zakynthos Island, I discovered that sea turtles were nesting on the beaches of Laganas Bay. Overwhelmed by curiosity I started to make observations and keep notes. This continued for the next couple of years (Fig. 1) and led to some elementary publications (e.g., Margaritoulis 1980; Margaritoulis 1982). A friend of mine, working at the Biology Department of the University of Athens (Dr Nikos Margaris, later Professor of Ecology at the University of Thessaloniki) informed me, after some literature search, that although sea turtles were present in the Greek seas, no nesting was ever reported in the Greek territory. For assurance, he



Figure 1. To reach the remote Sekania beach, for observations, we used a small inflatable boat from our camp in Daphni, about 1.5 km to the east (Photo: D. Margaritoulis, August 1978).



propelled me to an Associate Professor of Zoology, who disappointed me by saying that I might be mistaken because sea turtles reproduce “in the tropics”. This prompted me to purchase a Super 8mm movie camera and to film –over the course of two years– a 25-minute documentary, containing all stages of the sea turtle’s life, which proved extremely valuable in my future presentations raising awareness among the public and also to authorities. I learned a lot on sea turtles from scientific literature and other articles, which I was getting from University libraries in Greece and abroad whenever I could. I contacted by post –no internet then– many authors, getting their addresses from their papers, who sent me more articles and unpublished information. Names of famous turtle researchers of the time come to mind: Archie Carr, Peter Pritchard, Jim Richardson, George Hughes, Jack Frazier, Karen Bjorndal, Nat Frazer, Ken Dodd and others.

In Greece, at that time, the governmental office pertaining to environmental and nature conservation matters was the Secretariat of the National Council on Physical Planning and

the Environment (SNCPPE), based at the Ministry of Coordination and directed by Marinos Geroulanos. However, legislation for the protection of nature was greatly lacking, besides legislation on National Forests and Ramsar sites. I wrote letters, signed by Byron Antypas the Executive Director of HSPN, to the SNCPPE and the Prefecture of Zakynthos asking protection of the nesting beaches. In January 1980, I pleaded the help of the IUCN who suggested that I should contact the SNCPPE. I followed their advice and assisted SNCPPE to draft a funding proposal for WWF/IUCN, which was readily accepted in early 1981 (project No 1822). The contract was signed by the SNCPPE and the funds administered by the HSPN.

I also informed Mrs Niki Goulandris, founder and director of the Goulandris Natural History Museum, who had contacts with members of the government on nature-conservation matters. Niki assisted in the issuing, by the SNCPPE, of a Ministerial Decision for the protection of various habitats in Greece, which included three of the Zakynthos nesting beaches (Sekania, Marathonissi and Gerakas) (13



Figure 2. These signs, proposed by the HSPN and made by the Prefecture, were erected on the nesting beaches of Zakynthos in 1981.



March 1980). Nevertheless, this decision was simply a wish list, as the essential legislative background to protect a habitat did not exist. The lack of basic nature conservation legislation resulted that any measure for the protection of the nesting beaches, had to be based on existing laws, such as those on housing or forestry, which could be easily voided by an appropriate legal action.

In December 1980, I was invited by Professor Nikos Margaritis, to talk to his students at the University of Thessaloniki. These talks, continued in 1981 and 1982, garnered much interest from students and were the main source of recruiting volunteers for the summer monitoring projects I had initiated. I also started to write popular articles in Greek newspapers and magazines to highlight the phenomenon and acquire public attention.

In spring 1981, with the President of the HSPN –Prof. Dimitrios Phitos– we visited the Prefect of Zakynthos, and provided advice for the protection of nesting, i.e., by erecting signs on the nesting beaches (Fig. 2) and forbidding vehicular traffic along Laganas beach. In summer 1981, with the help of a few volunteers in the course of the WWF project, we collected data and

informed tourists on the beaches. The first tags (plastic Jumbo and metal monel No 49), ordered through the project, came in late and we started to use them in the following season (i.e., 1982). These tags had the address of HSPN and the plastic tags proclaimed a reward of 100 Drachmas. However, during the 1981 night patrols we observed that some turtles bore metal tags with the address of University of Rome, Italy. Soon, we discovered that an Italian zoologist was tagging turtles on Zakynthos beaches. I managed to contact him and asked him to refrain from such an activity as we would start soon our tagging project, which he promptly did, albeit somewhat reluctantly. His name was Roberto Argano, in charge of another WWF project (No 1813) investigating sea turtle interactions with fishers but sought to also explore some beaches in the Ionian Sea for turtle nesting (Argano & Baldari 1983). Eventually, we became friends and later I invited him to co-author the first collective publication on sea turtles in the Mediterranean (Margaritoulis et al. 2003). In summer 1981, I also carried out rapid surveys in Kyparissia Bay, in Lakonikos Bay and in Romanos beach; in all these areas I found turtle nests, albeit at much lower densities than those in Zakynthos.



Figure 3. Jack Frazier (far left) and Susana Salas (fourth from left) with Margaritoulis family just before leaving home for the nesting areas in 1982 (Photo: D. Margaritoulis).



In September 1981, I participated at the Congress of the Hellenic Zoological Society with an oral presentation (Margaritoulis 1985), enlisted as a member and made acquaintance with several attendees, academics and amateurs.

In November 1981, I drafted a long memorandum on the Zakynthos case and presented it to the newly established Ministry of Physical Planning, Housing and the Environment (YHOP in Greek). The new Minister, Antonis Tritsis, much in favour of environmental protection was very interested in the plight of sea turtles and asked me if I could work for the Ministry. I readily accepted and from May 1982, I found myself working for the YHOP. A major project instigated by the new Minister was the elaboration of a frame-law for the protection of the environment and nature. I was privileged to take part in this endeavour, by contributing in the nature-conservation section. This frame-law (No 1650), issued in 1986 and still in use, introduced the necessary legal prerequisites for the effective protection of the environment and nature. The creation

of the National Marine Park of Zakynthos in 1999 was based on this law.

In the meantime, the SNCPPE started to dissolve, and its environmental and nature-conservation obligations were gradually transferred to YHOP. However, the transfer took time with some antagonistic elements between employees at the two entities, and as a result the 1982 nesting season found two different teams working with sea turtles at Zakynthos. Eventually, and at the dismay of WWF, the project No 1822 terminated in December 1982 with two different final reports submitted! It is worth noting that Dr Jack Frazier, investigating in 1982 sea turtles in Egypt, asked me if he could visit our project in Zakynthos. I readily invited him, and he soon was part of the team that started tagging at Sekania beach (Fig. 3). Jack has been a major source of advice and information on science and conservation of sea turtles, and I consider him my mentor. In 1982, we started to tag turtles also in Kyparissia Bay (Fig. 4) with the help of dedicated volunteers from the University of Thessaloniki.



Figure 4. The first turtle (tag number Z-255) tagged in Kyparissia Bay on 12 July 1982. Initially, we used No 49 metal monel tags, which proved too big for our loggerheads, and soon we shifted to the smaller model No 681 (Photo: Vangelis Karanatsidis).

In July 1982, in the face of the ever-growing tourist developments in Laganas Bay, the Ministry suspended all building constructions in a large area. This emergency measure, taken to gain time until a so-called Zone of Housing Regulation (ZOE in Greek) would provide some protection for the nesting beaches, caused strong reactions. Local newspapers criticized the Ministry and the sea turtle project. Project volunteers and I were threatened. Verbal abuse, physical violence, and slander continued also in the following years (Sfantos 1990). Eventually, the expected ZOE, issued in 1984, did not change much the local attitude against the imposed building restrictions. In 1987, the ZOE was replaced by a Ministerial Decision (Warren & Antonopoulou 1990), which in 1990 assumed the stronger status of a Presidential Decree. In some areas (e.g., Sekania beach holding 50% of all nests in Laganas Bay), building was totally prohibited, and local owners started to contemplate the possibilities of expropriation or selling of their land. These talks culminated successfully in 1994 with the purchase of the area behind Sekania beach by the newly created WWF Greece. This story, however, deserves its own article.

In March 1983, I gave a talk and showed my film in a public presentation at the Goulandris Natural History Museum. Afterwards, a lady from the audience congratulated me and told me that in Laganas Bay she had found some strange-looking stones, and wondered if there was a connection with sea turtle nesting. This is how I met Lily Venizelos who later founded MEDASSET and played a very important role in the conservation of sea turtles in Greece and in the Mediterranean. In the same year, I secured a small fund from the Ministry to cover basic expenses for the projects. That was very helpful as volunteers could have some support to participate in the fieldwork. Visiting the projects in Zakynthos (Fig. 5) and Kyparissia Bay (Fig. 6), I noticed the great enthusiasm of young people for the offered opportunity to work in the field, something that they could not obtain from the University mandates of the time. I also noticed the difficulty of funding a field project through a governmental office. Hence, the creation of a non-governmental organization seemed imperative. I spread the idea among the students working in the field and there was a general approval. After the end of the 1983 fieldwork, I organized a couple of meetings with the most enthusiastic students, and soon we



Figure 5. The first tagging team for the 1983 nesting season on Sekania beach. From left: Giorgos Giannakakis, Vassilis Ditsios, the late Chrysi-Yianna Politou and Chrysoula Mytilinaiou, all became founding members of the Society (Photo: D. Margaritoulis, June 1983).



found ourselves drafting the objectives and the by-laws of the planned organization (Fig. 7). We named it “The Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece (STPS)”, admittedly a rather long name and not-much admired by marketing/advertising people, but reflecting very clearly its scope. A lawyer, friend of mine, polished up the statutes, which were signed by 21 founding members as dictated by the Greek law, and submitted them to court in November 1983 signalling the birth of the STPS.

The Society is administered by a 7-member BoD, elected from the membership at the Annual General Assembly convened in February. Soon we increased our membership and with the assistance of mass media, we gained a considerable visibility in the Greek society. For fund-raising reasons, we introduced in 2001 the brand name ARCHELON (ΑΡΧΕΛΩΝ, in Greek) but we also kept the original name as a clarification. Hereafter, I use both names irrespective of the time period. In February 1984, I visited Andreas Demetropoulos, instigator of sea turtle

conservation in Cyprus, at the Fisheries Department in Nicosia. He dispatched me to Paphos where I was guided by his assistant, another Andreas, to see the green turtle head-starting project, and also the now well-known Lara turtle beach. In the same year a research proposal that I had drafted for the Ministry, in cooperation with Greek Universities, was accepted by the European Commission (EC). The resulting 4-year project (ENV-790-GR) included investigation of oceanographic and geological features at the nesting areas, by the competent faculties of the University of Athens, and of anthropogenic threats by the Ecology Department of University of Thessaloniki (Arianoutsou 1988), with turtle monitoring carried out by the STPS.

After this project, turtle monitoring in Zakynthos and Kyparissia Bay, as well as in other areas, continued by the STPS with funds from WWF International, EC, Ministry of Environment, Prefecture of Zakynthos and other sources. Our systematic fieldwork, accumulating data year after year, provided important results in the long term. The value of volunteers’



Figure 6. A team of students and –later– founding members of the STPS (from left: Eugenia Roidou, Dimitris Raptopoulos, Giorgos Hadjiphotiou) volunteering in 1983 in southern Kyparissia Bay (Photo: D. Margaritoulis).

work could not be appreciated within the short term of their service or even within a full nesting season. The multidecadal accumulation of data gave fruit after many years, in accord with the turtles' time scale.

A breakthrough for the STPS's recognition by the international community was an urgent request we received in early 1985 from the Sea Turtle Rescue Fund at the Center for Environmental Education (CEE) -Washington DC, USA- to collect signatures supporting the CEE's efforts, at the next CITES meeting (Buenos Aires, Argentina), to reject proposals for the increase of international trade in sea turtle products. We organized a rapid campaign in Greece and we collected, through our members, more than 2000 signatures in a week, many from prominent members of the Greek society; a remarkable achievement in those days. For the record, the proposals to increase trade in sea turtle products were rejected (Anonymous 1985).

In the meantime, the STPS expanded its mandates to Environmental Education, Public Awareness, Training of Volunteers, Fisheries Interaction, In-water Tagging, Satellite Telemetry, and later initiated the nationwide Sea Turtle Rescue Network and in 1994 founded the Sea Turtle Rescue Centre in Glyfada; all these initiatives are described sufficiently by Rees (2005).

I would like to highlight here the importance of raising public awareness and working with children and youngsters. The live school presentations, carried out by STPS fieldworkers using visual material and experiences from the nesting beaches, as well as the creation of the so-called "Turtle Briefcases" that were dispatched to schools, greatly fascinated children (Kremezi-Margaritouli 1992). The charismatic life cycle of sea turtles that use both terrestrial and marine habitats, assisted much our efforts and soon the sea turtle became the best-known and favourable animal species for young people in Greece (Pantis et al. 1996). In our



Figure 7. Meeting at my home in 1983 to discuss the bylaws of the forthcoming Society. From left (1) standing: Dimitris Margaritouli, Nikos Vassilakopoulos, Aris Laskaratos, Thomas Arapis (current President), Anna Kremezi-Margaritouli; (2) sitting: Kostas Moraitis, Eugenia Roidou (first President 1984-86), Dimitris Raptopoulos, Chrysoula Mytilinaiou (in front), Lily Kornaraki, Giorgos Hadjiphotiou, Vassilis Ditsios. All volunteered in the STPS projects in Zakynthos and/or Kyparissia Bay.



public presentations we actually “used” the sea turtle as a symbol for the environment and nature. Sensitization of the general public grew amazingly, to the extent that citizens appealed to sea turtles if they needed a legitimate cause to stop a coastal construction or an annoying activity. I believe that the relatively “narrow” objective of our Society helped us to go deep into the subject and focus better our efforts. As a result, the Society soon became the “national sea turtle expert” in Greece. Governmental departments, municipalities and consultant companies were asking the Society’s opinion when a planned development or activity would interact with sea turtles. We shared our opinion freely, as well as any data. In a chain-reaction, this *modus vivendi* attracted more young people and increased participation and voluntarism. We accepted in our ranks anybody willing to assist, no matter of their faculty or capacity or education level. There was room for all who wanted to assist, and the Society was receiving free services from several professionals. I consider this spectacular rise of public sensitization as a major accomplishment of our work.

Volunteers had great ideas. We listened to them as much as we could, and our motto was “let’s do it and see how it works”. An example is our databases. They started from being very simple and gradually became very professional through the work of some computer geniuses volunteering in our projects. I am happy to know that volunteers still come up with innovative ideas, for instance a software application has been designed to find the laying date of a nest that was located through hatchling emergence. This will save us many hours of tedious work trying to match hatched nests to those nests left unmarked when they were made.

When we expanded our projects to other areas (e.g., Lakonikos Bay and Crete), volunteers had to use all their abilities in order to build up camping sites with a tolerable toilet, to design beach surveys in the most efficient manner and

organize rotation of everyday tasks among them. These practical details were not imposed on them, instead they were given scope to improvise and find the best available solutions. Project leaders had enormous competencies with rather loose terms of reference, besides the strict field methodologies.

Some volunteers participated for several years in a row, and some built their carrier by working in the Society’s projects. Many did their practicums, BScs, MScs and even PhDs, and for the great majority their term in ARCHELON enriched their CVs. I estimate that about 15,000 people volunteered so far for ARCHELON. This strong force originated from many nationalities, from various disciplines and different levels. I have personally witnessed the wide spread of our Society when in various international meetings people may approach me saying proudly that they had served in an ARCHELON project. This has always been a major source of joy for me.

Naturally, not all volunteers were happy after their term. Some of them actually left the project prematurely. It may be that they could not bear the strict and monotonous routines, the early morning awakening or staying late at night, the sometimes-tough camping conditions, the different attitudes of others, and several other possible reasons. However, I believe that most of them had a memorable time away from their ordinary life mandates. In the words of Hannah O’Mahoney, who prepared her PhD by studying ARCHELON volunteers in Kyparissia Bay: “Volunteers are able to experience a lifestyle which is free from the various accoutrements of paid employment and commodity consumption” (O’Mahoney 2014). The same conclusion is vividly depicted in the award-winning documentary of Lefteris Fylaktos “The ARCHELON Bubble” (<https://vimeo.com/25344655>).

A great help in ARCHELON’s fledging was WWF funding, in the early years, and later the EC’s LIFE projects. We acquired



the first LIFE project in 1995, with principal objective to elaborate a Management Plan (MP) for the main three nesting areas on Crete. This project was very successful as the produced MP, although not fully endorsed by the Greek State, is still applied by several Cretan communities and businesses (Irvine et al. 1998).

Another LIFE project, in 1998, had the aim to recover the small –at the time– nesting population in Kyparissia Bay, by applying nest protection measures to combat the high rates of predation and inundation. We explained to EC that such a recovery, if happened, would not be seen within the 4-year duration of the project. Today, after 25 years, we can confirm that this project was a great success, considering the tremendous increase of the nesting population seen in the last years.

Finally, ARCHELON's participation in international conferences, especially at the Annual Sea Turtle Symposium and the Mediterranean Conference on Marine Turtles, as well as in various meetings organized by supranational entities (e.g., UNEP-MAP, RAC/SPA, GFCM, EC and Council of Europe) provided further international recognition to the burgeoning Society.

In a brief conclusion, I can say that the firm commitment to the well-focused scope and the long-lasting internal rules, coupled with transparency and democracy, all played important roles in the establishing of ARCHELON as a major figure in the sea turtle scene in Greece and abroad.

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40 YEARS – ARCHELON