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Threats to marine turtles in Thines Kiparissias (Greece)

- NGO REPORT -

Document prepared by ARCHELON

ARCHELON, The Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece



Conservation efforts during 2023 at the nesting habitat of *Caretta caretta*in Kyparissia Bay, western Peloponnese (Natura 2000 - GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS")

Short report submitted to the European Commission and the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention

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Summary

This report outlines major outcomes and presents the issues related to the protection of the loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*) and their habitats in Kyparissia Bay during the 2023 reproductive period focusing on the 9.5km core nesting area (from rivers Arkadikos in the south, to Neda in the north) (Image 1). The report presents the results of the conservation work carried out by ARCHELON and a follow up on the application of the Judgment of the European Court of Justice of 10 November 2016 (case C-504/14) and the Bern Convention Recommendation No. 174 (2014), which have been issued regarding this part of the Kyparissia Bay.

The core nesting area is entirely included in the Natura 2000 site GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA" and it is part of a Nature Protection Area designated in 2018 by a Presidential Decree (PD). The safety, protection, and management of the protected area is the responsibility of the Natural Environment and Climate Change Agency (NECCA) and especially of its Management Unit (MU) of Strofylia National Park and Protected Areas of Western Peloponnese.

ARCHELON's systematic monitoring and collection of nesting data in Kyparissia Bay started in 1984. Following internationally approved protocols since 1992, trained onsite volunteers supervised by ARCHELON personnel annually protect the majority of nests in the core nesting area against predation by mammals, inundation by the sea, and light pollution caused by artificial lights. Since 2006, a gradual increase of nests, and therefore of adult females, has been recorded, presumably as a result of the extensive nest protection during the prior years. During 2023, sea turtle nesting activity was completed, with more than 5000 nests recorded on the core nesting area (9.5km), and approx. another 1000 nests were recorded to the north of the core nesting area (approx. 4.5km), i.e. in the northern part of GR2550005¹. Approximately 86.5% of the recorded nests were protected against predation, inundation, trampling and/or light pollution. Regarding sea turtle strandings, 9 turtles were recorded by ARCHELON between early May and late September. Overall, according to the competent Coast Guards, 23 dead sea turtles were found in the whole of Kyparissia Bay (43.5km) since the beginning of the year.

In particular, in 2023, nesting turtles, their nests, and hatchlings faced a variety of disturbances due to many activities that directly breached the PD's regulations. These included the extensive vehicular traffic on the nesting beach and the sand dune zone, non-stacking of beach furniture during night hours, extensive light pollution from private and public sources, freelance camping, uncontrolled agricultural activities in the sand dune zone, and the occurrence of annual local festivals just behind the nesting beach. None or minimal action was taken to mitigate the aforementioned threats bearing a long-term impact on both the nesting habitat and the reproductive activity of sea turtles. Regarding the threats that are not regulated by the PD, ARCHELON recorded extensive human presence on the beaches at night-time, while the operation of beach bars in the sand dune zone (even during night-time) caused an increase in light pollution, the ongoing trampling and continuous degradation of sand dune vegetation, as well as the transformation of neighbouring Nature Protection Areas into illegal parking areas.

This disrespect of environmental legislation is repeated year after year and causes continuous degradation of the area. Practical but important aspects of management of the Nature Protection Area of Kyparissia Bay, such as wardening and supervision, signposts and appropriate infrastructure for the reception of visitors in the area are totally lacking. Important activities posing threats within the Nature Protection Area are not regulated by the PD, and these are expected to or should be addressed by the Management Plan (MP) for the site. Until these activities are regulated, many of the long-standing problems that threaten sea turtles and the habitat remain unresolved. In conclusion, although the high ecological value of this coastal area is the main attraction for visitors, local authorities, local operators, and visitors do not generally respect

¹ It should be noted that during 2023, due to the limited number of volunteers, no monitoring and protection of nests took place in the northern part of the Bay between Tholo to the south and Alfios River to the north (about 29.5km). Most of this beach length is included in the northernmost part of GR 2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA" and in GR 2330005 "THINES KAI PARALIAKO DASOS ZACHAROS, LIMNI KAIAFA, STROFYLIA, KAKOVATOS".

environmental legislation, and especially regulations concerning the nesting beach and the coastal habitats.

Foreword

This short report is a follow up to previous reports submitted annually outlining the main events and presenting the issues related to the protection of loggerhead sea turtles and their habitats in southern Kyparissia Bay, i.e. in the core nesting area, within the Natura 2000 site GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA", during the 2023 reproductive period. It contains information on the monitoring and conservation work and the threats in the terrestrial as well as the marine habitat, as recorded through the fieldwork conducted by ARCHELON. Where appropriate, information related to the northernmost part of GR2550005 (beyond the core nesting area), as well as the neighbouring sites GR2330005 "THINES KAI PARALIAKO DASOS ZACHAROS, LIMNI KAIAFA, STROFYLIA, KAKOVATOS" and GR 2330008 "THALASSIA PERIOCHI KOLPOU KYPARISSIAS: AKR. KATAKOLO – KYPARISSIA", is also presented (Image 2).

1. Background

Kyparissia Bay, located in western Peloponnese, hosts one of the largest reproductive populations of the loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) in the Mediterranean, along with other important and protected ecological features. Its coastline consists of approximately 43.5km of continuous sandy beach, backed by dunes and coastal forests, from the river Alfios (in the north) to the river Arkadikos (in the south). A small number of additional beaches separated by rocky outcrops is located further south until the town of Kyparissia. Due to the ecological significance of the bay, three sites of the Natura 2000 network were set up along the bay: 1. GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA", 2. GR 2330005 "THINES KAI PARALIAKO DASOS ZACHAROS, LIMNI KAIAFA, STROFYLIA, KAKOVATOS, 3. GR 2330008 "THALASSIA PERIOCHI KOLPOU KYPARISSIAS: AKR. KATAKOLO – KYPARISSIA" (Marine area).

Part of the site GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA", where approx. 84% of the total nesting activity was recorded during the initial years of monitoring (1984-1989), is considered the core nesting area (hereafter southern Kyparissia Bay) from Arkadikos river in the south to Neda river in the north (Image 2).

Touristic development and numbers of visitors in southern Kyparissia Bay started to increase around 2000, impacting the sea turtle habitat and the other ecological features of the site. The Ministry of Environment took action to safeguard the core nesting area; however, most of the conservation issues remained unresolved. This led the European Commission to take the Greek State to the Court of Justice in March 2014. The Court hearing took place on 13 January 2016 and the relevant Judgment was posted on 10 November 2016, declaring failure of the Greek State to fulfill its obligations under the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC.

The Bern Convention also opened a case file for this matter. In December 2014, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention issued the Recommendation No. 174 on the conservation of the nesting habitat in southern Kyparissia Bay. The Recommendation consists of 12 points, which address the main anthropogenic threats for sea turtle nesting. The case file is reviewed annually during the Bureau and the Standing Committee meetings since December 2015. During their latest meeting in December 2022, the Standing Committee decided to keep the case file open, due to (a) the poor enforcement of relevant legislation, (b) the incomplete implementation of Recommendation No. 174, and (c) the lack of a MP for the area.

In 2018, almost two years after the Judgment of the European Court of Justice (November 2016) and four years after the Bern Convention Recommendation (December 2014), Kyparissia Bay in its entirety was designated a Nature Protection Area by a Presidential Decree. The PD was issued in October 2018 (Government Gazettes D 391/03-10-2018, D 414/12-10-2018) and includes the three Natura 2000 sites GR2550005, GR2330005, and GR2330008.

ARCHELON's long-term project, carried out annually from early-May through mid-October, involves monitoring of the nesting activity, protection of nests and hatchlings, and recording of turtle strandings.

Additionally ARCHELON's field team regularly records the threats that persist on site and implements public awareness activities to inform visitors and residents of the area.

2. The 2023 nesting season

I. Monitoring and Conservation work

During 2023, ARCHELON carried out monitoring and conservation work from 5 May until 30 September, within the GR2550005 Natura site. To facilitate monitoring work, the core nesting area is divided into four sectors (O, A, B, C), while the remaining 7km north of River Neda (northern part of GR2550005) in two sectors (D, E) (Image 3)².

Preliminary data indicate that approx. 5000 nests were recorded in the 9.5km core nesting area (Sectors O, A-C) within the GR2550005 Natura site. The majority of nests were protected against predation, innundation, and disorientation of hatchlings due to artificial lights. An additional 1000 nests were recorded in Sector D (approx. 4.5km), north of River Neda, also within the same Natura site. Tagging of nesting females continued for one more year, aiming to obtain better understanding of the sea turtles' inter-nesting and remigration patterns.

ARCHELON's Public Awareness activities were conducted (a) on the beach, (b) in various touristic facilities, (c) in ARCHELON's Environmental Station at Agiannakis, and (d) through the operation of ARCHELON's Information Kiosk (15 June – 15 September) at Kalo Nero village. Over 5500 visitors and locals were informed about sea turtles and the threats affecting them.

In 2023, 9 dead turtles were recorded by ARCHELON members in the monitored part of Kyparissia Bay. An additional 14 stranded turtles were recorded by the competent Coast Guards along the entire Kyparissia Bay (43.5km), bringing the total to 23 dead turtles. It was not possible to accurately define the cause of death of most stranded turtles, since they were in a highly decomposed stage when found, but in cases where it was possible to do so, the cause appears to be attributed to accidental capture in fishing gear.

II. Threats

This section focusses on the anthropogenic threats and pressures directly or indirectly impacting sea turtles (adults and hatchlings), their nests, and the nesting habitat along the monitored section of Kyparissia Bay, as recorded by ARCHELON during 2023.

A. Southern part of GR 2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA" – core nesting area

Threats on Sector O

Unsustainable touristic development: Sector O contains the seaside settlement of Kalo Nero. This part of the beach has already been severely affected by tourism development, in contrast with the rest of the core area, which remains more pristine. In 2023, as was the case in previous years, a large part of the nesting beach was occupied by sunbeds, umbrellas, wooden paths, and other structures. Additionally light pollution from public and private light sources remained a serious conservation problem (photos 1a-1b). There are seven wooden platforms on the beach, which have been constructed by local businesses, for which the authorities have issued demolition protocols in previous years, however, for yet another year, no action has been taken for their removal and no restoration works have taken place. Moreover, despite the provisions of the PD, neither the beach furniture was stacked correctly (photo 2), nor was the existing extensive light pollution decreased.

It must be noted that light pollution in Kalo Nero is so strong that it renders the standard method of "nest-shading" applied in other nesting areas, useless. In Kalo Nero, ARCHELON's team is obliged to use the unorthodox practice of "nest-boxing". According to preliminary data, a total of 323 nests (39.2% of nests on sector O) were affected by light pollution. "Nest-boxing" was applied on the most extreme cases, i.e. 162

² It should be noted that during 2023, due to the limited number of volunteers, no monitoring and protection of nests took place sector E.

nests (20.2% of nests on sector O).

In addition to the regular light pollution levels, <u>an annual local Music Festival took place on 5 August 2023</u>, just behind the nesting beach (photo 3) in direct violation to the PD. The participation of hundreds of people and a live band on a stage (with floodlights) caused both noise and intense light pollution.

Extensive beach cleaning and vehicle presence on the beach: Vehicles moving along the beach cause extensive degradation of the habitat, compacting the sand and oftentimes damaging existing nests (photo 4a). Incidents of beach cleaning using heavy vehicles in this sector were recorded on 25 May, 30 May, and 1 June (photo 4b).

Threats on Sectors A-B-C

Sectors A, B, and C of the core nesting area include the beaches of Vounaki, Agiannakis and Elaia respectively. This area is characterized by a very wide beach with an appropriate incline for nesting turtles, backed by low sand dunes with vegetation. These sectors host about 75% of all nests recorded along the 9.5km core nesting area and must be maintained in a pristine condition in order to effectively protect sea turtles. Unfortunately, each of these beach sectors faces several challenges caused by human activities. Most of the conservation issues threatening the area remained unresolved for one more year. Interventions on the natural landscape have led to a slow but steady degradation of the ecosystem.

Beach bars: Beach bars are located in the sand dune zone on sectors B and C and continued to operate for one more year (6th consecutive year for sector C, and 4th consecutive year for sector B), resulting in destruction of the dune vegetation. An increasing number of visitors were attracted to the beach bars especially during the high touristic season, from mid-July to end-August, which led to numerous vehicles parking in the surrounding areas, and therefore creating new illegal parking lots (photo 5).

Freelance campers: A huge number of freelance campers occupied the beach and the sand dune zone during August, the peak of the hatching season. Camping equipment obstructed sea turtle nesting. Additional consequences of the freelance camping activity were the extensive trampling of the sand dunes by vehicles and people walking on the beach and the sand dune area (photo 6).

Vehicles on the dunes: In order to prevent further sand dune degradation and fragmentation, in 2021 the Ministry of Environment placed concrete barriers blocking access to the dirt roads that were illegally constructed by the real estate firm NEOS KOTINOS S.A. (2011 and 2012). However, this measure was shown to be inefficient and caused further degradation of the surrounding habitats, as vehicles continuously accessed the beach by driving around the sides of these barriers (photo 7). No action has been taken to further enforce the barriers and to block other beach entrances. A large number of vehicles was recorded to be parked on the back of the beach (photo 8).

Agriculture: Behind sectors A and B there are extensive stretches of land used for agriculture with negative impact on the state of the sand dunes (photo 9).

Coastal constructions: There are a few houses built in the sand dune area which permanently alter and degrade the natural sand dune zone (see photo 5).

Light pollution: No efforts have been made to reduce light pollution. There is a relatively small number of artificial lights along these sectors (2 private houses with floodlights and a few public streetlights), which impact a large number of nests due to the high nest density in the area. ARCHELON's preliminary data for 2023 indicate that almost 600 nests were affected by light pollution, representing 8.2% of the total on Sector A, 16.8% on Sector B and 23.6% on Sector C.

B. Northern part of GR 2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA"

Threats on Sector D

In 2023, ARCHELON carried out monitoring and protection of nests only on sector D, where ACHELON's field team recorded similar anthropogenic disturbances as compared to sectors A, B, and C. These include a large number of vehicles on the beach driving in close proximity to nests (photo 10), temporary beach

shelters, caravans, tents, camping on the beach oftentimes with beach fires (photos 11a-11b), light pollution, and beach bars with illegal constructions on the sand dune zone.

Local Festivals: This year, sector D hosted two large public events. During 28 July and 1 August, the area was visited by hundreds of people, resulting in the occurrence of nightly parties on the beach and in the sand dune area, in direct opposition to the PD (photo 12). A few days later, on 3 August 2023, the village of Giannitsochori hosted its annual Music Festival. Artificial lights, loud music, and the participation of hundreds of people, caused extensive light and noise pollution during hatching season just behind the nesting beach (photo 13).

C. GR 2330008 "THALASSIA PERIOCHI KOLPOU KYPARISSIAS: AKR. KATAKOLO – KYPARISSIA" – marine area of Kyparissia Bay

Professional and recreational fishing remain a threat for sea turtles during the mating and nesting season. Uncontrolled fishing activity occurred widely across all sectors, creating potential obstacles for incoming turtles and increasing the danger of entanglement and injuries by fishing lines and nets. In 2023, fishing boats and stationary nets were recorded very close to the shore in all beach sectors, in some cases at distances less than 30m from shore (photo 14). Set nets are usually left for the duration of the night, so any females attempting to emerge for nesting are at risk of entrapment. The fisheries conservation issue is not addressed in the PD and therefore needs to be included in the under-elaboration MP.

3. Discussion and Recommendations

The long-term field project of ARCHELON

As mentioned, ARCHELON has been monitoring Kyparissia Bay's nesting beaches since 1984. By 1992, it was known that many nests in the area were affected by predation from mammals (average of 50% of nests /year) and by sea water inundation (average of 25% of nests /year). To mitigate these threats, in 1992 ARCHELON began implementing protection measures to the majority of nests within the core nesting habitat. These protection measures resulted in a notable decrease of nests impacted by predation down to 13% of the annual total and of nests affected by sea water inundation down to 9% respectively.

The long-term survival of the loggerhead population largely depends mainly on the number of hatchlings making it to the sea and being recruited to the population. Sea turtles are long-lived animals, needing many years to reach sexual maturity; as such, positive effects on their population cannot be recorded until after many years, when the adult females return to their natal beach for nesting.

A significant increasing trend in overall nest numbers, which corresponds to an increase of adult females has been recorded since 2006 in the core nesting area, with the average number of nests reaching 1700 (seasons 2006 – 2022) as compared to 552 in the years prior (1994 – 2005). Another indication of an increasing population is shown through parallel analyses of turtle tagging data, which demonstrates an increase in the percentage of "neophyte" turtles, i.e. turtles that are observed laying eggs for the first time. Given that the estimated age of sexual maturity for loggerheads in the Mediterranean ranges from 14-25 years, the observed 207% increase in nests is believed to be the result of the protection measures that have continuously been applied since 1992. 2023 is the 11th consecutive year (2013-2023) that the number of nests in the core nesting area of Kyparissia Bay exceed those recorded in Laganas Bay (Zakynthos Island). The conservation work carried out by ARCHELON's project, where about 100 researchers and volunteers from all over the world participated, ensured a successful sea turtle nesting and hatching season this summer.

Governance and Law enforcement issues

Following the designation of the entire Kyparissia Bay as a Nature Protection Area by the PD in 2018 there was very little -if any- progress concerning the implementation of the 12 points of the Bern Convention Recommendation, and the compliance with the European Court of Justice Judgment of 10 November 2016. There are three issues that ARCHELON would like to bring in the discussion of this is problematic situation:

The first issue is that local authorities demonstrate complete disregard for the regulations contained in the legislation for the site. As a result, the existing legal provisions of the PD and the rest of the environmental

legislation are not implemented and enforced adequately. In 2020, the competent municipalities, as well as part of the local community, submitted 7 cancellation requests against this PD to the Hellenic Republic Council of State. These were rejected in early 2021 (Decisions 164/2021 until 170/2021), after ARCHELON intervened in defense of the PD, in cooperation with MEDASSET and WWF Greece. However, the complete disregard for legislation continues until today.

The second issue is that there are important activities posing threats within the Nature Protection Area that are not regulated by the PD, and these are expected to or should be addressed by the MP for the site. The relevant project of the Ministry of Environment that is expected to draft these has been delayed greatly for some years now. The issues to be addressed include the public access to the beach through a legal road network, fisheries regulations, a framework of operation for the beach bars in the core nesting area, measures to control light pollution, as well as regulation and management of human presence on the nesting beach during night hours. Until these activities are regulated, many of the long-standing problems that threaten sea turtles and the habitat remain unresolved.

The third issue is related to practical but important aspects of the management of the Nature Protection Area of Kyparissia Bay; there is a total absence of wardening and supervision, a lack of signposts and appropriate infrastructure for the reception of visitors in the area and a problem with litter management. The responsibility for the site has been entrusted to NECCA and its local MU since 2020. This is the MU of Strofylia Wetlands National Park and Protected Areas of Western Peloponnese, which is based close to Patras (2hrs away from southern Kyparissia Bay). Until now, the MU has not been involved in active site management.

Recommendations

- Strict enforcement and implementation of the PD provisions is essential for the conservation of this valuable coastal ecosystem. Competent authorities must ensure that the existing threats of the protected area such as light pollution, beach bars and beach furniture, extensive vehicular traffic, free camping, annual local Music Festivals, uncontrolled agricultural and fishing activities, the existing illegal constructions, and the constructions of buildings, are dealt with permanently.
- The adoption of a MP, which should address the threats of illegal road network, light pollution, fisheries regulations, human presence at night, visitor management and operation of beach bars is quite necessary. The ongoing review and elaboration of Specific Environmental Studies and Management Plans for all Natura 2000 sites at a national scale must be completed as soon as possible.
- Sand dunes in the area of Kyparissia Bay are very important and they must be restored to a good conservation status, as soon as possible.
- The MU of NECCA that is responsible for the site must elaborate on ways to ensure the supervision and management of the protected area and the collaboration with local authorities and stakeholders, as soon as possible.

ANNEX: Images and photos:



Image 1: Map of Kyparissia Bay. The arrows indicate the core nesting area, ranging from Arkadikos river (south) to Neda river (north).

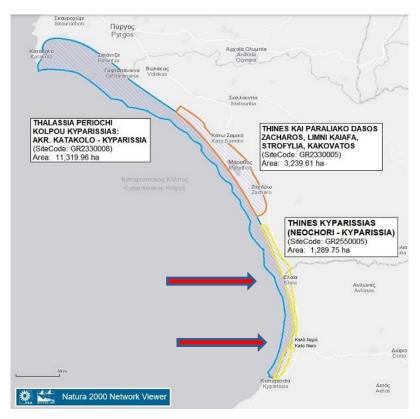


Image 2: Map of Kyparissia Bay and the relevant Natura 2000 sites. The three sites are included in the PD issued in 2018. The core nesting area is marked by the red arrows.

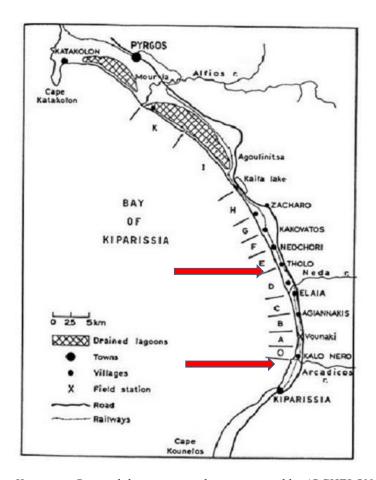


Image 3: Map of the entire Kyparissia Bay and the separation by sectors used by ARCHELON for the monitoring of Caretta caretta nesting activity. As indicated by the red arrows, monitoring work in 2023 covered five Sectors (O-D), all included in GR2550005 "THINES KYPARISSIAS: NEOCHORI – KYPARISSIA".



Photo 1a: Location Kalo Nero -26 June 2023 – Intense light pollution is a hindrance for nesting females and hatchlings. The photo is a clear example of light pollution caused by public and private light sources. The red circles show the illegal constructions of the coastal businesses and the unstacked sunbeds.

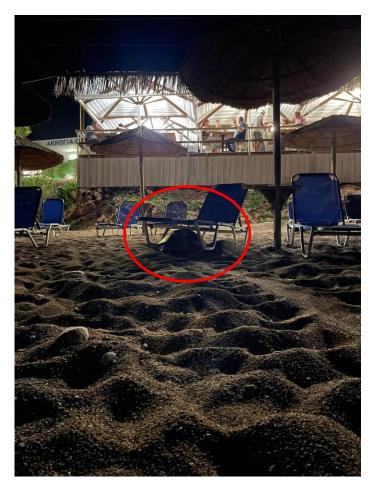


Photo 1b: Location Kalo Nero – 26 June 2023 – Intense light pollution is a hindrance for nesting females and hatchlings. A nesting female (red circle) is stuck under unstacked sunbeds.



Photo 2: Location Kalo Nero -8 August 2023, 6:00am - Local businesses do not stack beach furniture. Wooden pathways limit the nesting females and hatchlings.



Photo 3: Location Kalo Nero – 5 August 2023 – A festival with loud music and bright headlights is taking place just behind the nesting beach. Red arrows indicate nests right below the festival.



Photo 4a: Location Kalo Nero – 10 September

2023 – A vehicle drove over a hatching nest.

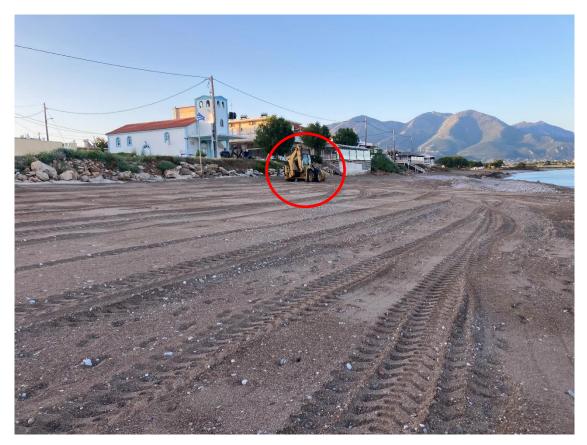


Photo 4b: Location Kalo Nero – 25 May 2023 – Beach cleaning with heavy vehicles (red circle) drastically affects the beach profile.



Photo 5: Location Agiannakis – August 2023 – The red circle indicates a beach-side villa, which severely alters and degraded the sand dune zone. The operating beach bar (yellow circle) apart from causing light pollution attracts a

significant number of vehicles, which park in the sand dune zone.



Photo 6: Location Elaia – July 2023 – The red circles show freelance camping on the beach and in the sand dune zone.



Photo 7: Location Agiannakis – 15 September 2023 – The continuous passing of vehicles shown by their tire tracks (red circle) demonstrates the inefficiency of the cement pillars (yellow arrow), which were placed by the Ministry of Environment and Energy (4 June 2021) on the illegal roads.

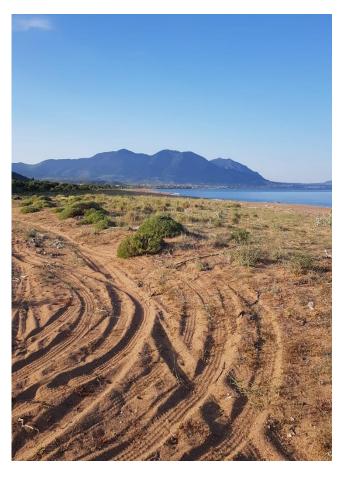


Photo 8: Location Vounaki -29 May 2023 - Vehicle presence on the beach and sand dune area cause the general degradation of the vegetation and sand dune system.



Photo 9: Location Vounaki -10 August 2023 - Agricultural activities in the sand dune zone result in the continuous degradation of the natural habitat type.



Photo 10: Location sector D-17 June 2023 – Vehicle tracks are shown right next to a nest, causing the potential disturbance or even destruction of the eggs.



Photo 11a: Location sector D-5 June 2023 – Freelance camping and bonfires cause the degradation of the sand dune area and the disturbance of nesting females.

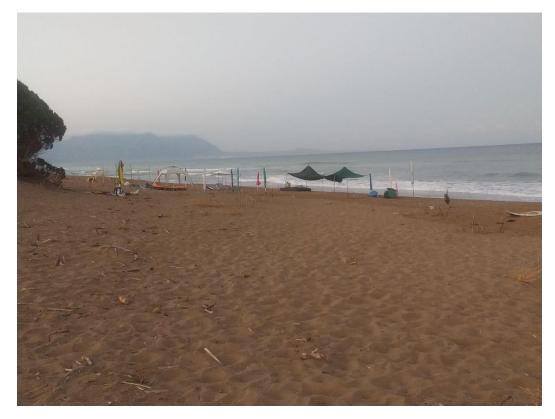


Photo 11b: Location Giannitsochori -8 August 2023 – Freelance camping and semi-permanent constructions on the beach hinder the nesting process.



Photo 12: Location Giannitsochori – 29 July 2023 – Members of the public are engaging in a beach party with loud music and bright lights resulting in hatchling disorientation. Big umbrellas and a "bar" construction have been installed on the beach and the sand dune area, resulting in the trampling of the vegetation.



Photo 13: Location Giannitsochori -3 August 2023 - A festival with loud music and bright floodlights is taking place just behind the nesting beach.

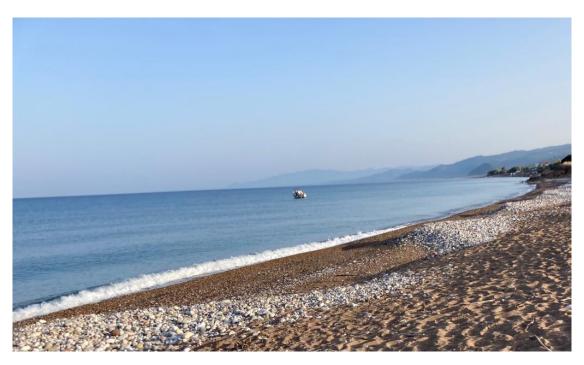


Photo 14: Location Kalo Nero – 20 June 2023 – Fishing with nets at a very close distance from the shore is a constant threat to nesting females, as they may get entangled and injured in their attempt to reach the beach for nesting.