

# Save the Turtles



# An Egyptian Voyage

Miss Turtle's Journey to Egypt



Ministry of State For Environmental Affairs

**BIODIVERSITY MONITORING  
& ASSESSMENT PROJECT  
( BioMAP )**

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## WHY THIS BOOK?

Wildlife is essential for man's existence on this planet, and we should work hard on conserving it. This is the message we are trying to get through to our children, through the series of stories published by the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs through the Biomap project.

All living organisms are linked into a single food web (including man). Any disturbance in the web will thus affect man. This is what is really happening; living organisms have started to disappear due to man's activities. The extinction of some species will play a major part in the flourishing of others that might be harmful and uncontrollable.

This story introduces the example of the turtle, just one of the animals which is important in keeping the ecosystem balanced. Man unintentionally harms turtles.

Due to the significance of this animal, international and Egyptian laws consider collecting or killing turtles a crime. This is meant to protect it from all threats, but people bend the law for trivial reasons and false beliefs. An example is the belief that feeding on turtle meat or drinking its blood gives better health. For this and other reasons the turtle has been continually over-collected, making it one of most endangered species in the world.

The story is written in a simple form, introducing the problems that turtles face in Egypt, and the efforts the Ministry of States for Environmental Affairs exerts through the Nature Conservation Sector to protect turtles. We also highlight the importance of everyone's efforts in protecting this important creature.

The authors

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## Miss Turtle's Journey to Egypt



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On an island in the heart of the Atlantic, there live many animals and plants, safely tucked away from man's reach. They live in peace there and take part in many entertaining activities such as beauty contests which all the various animals participate in.

The contests are not based only on outer beauty, but also on their importance for the environment and how helpful they are to other creatures. One day, all the animals agreed to organise a special beauty contest for the turtles, because they are some of Earth's oldest creatures. They have been here since the times when the now extinct dinosaurs used to roam the earth.

At last, the contest was ready to start. The animals had to make a big effort to win over the tortoises, who were angry about being forbidden to participate, even though they are close relatives of the turtles.





Eight participants were there, each one to represent one of the species of the world. The first contestant was the Green turtle. As her name suggests, she is green in colour. She eats seaweed and algae, cleaning the seas by getting rid of these harmful plants.

The second contestant was the Black turtle of the Pacific. She was only on a quick visit to the island. The third was the Loggerhead turtle. She is brown, large and has a big head. There was also the Leatherback turtle, the largest of all the turtles. She eats jellyfish, and is a professional diver who can swim for long distances. The fifth was the Hawksbill turtle. She has a mouth like a hawk's beak that helps her pick sea creatures from the cracks in the coral reef.

The little Olive Ridley turtle was the sixth contestant, with her lovely olive-coloured shell. The seventh was Kemp's Ridley turtle, a tiny little turtle. And the last contestant was the Flatback turtle, unique thanks to her flat shell.





The results were announced. Loggerhead was the second runner-up, and the first runner-up was Leatherback. The winner, however, was the Green turtle who got the title of "Miss Turtle".

The committee then decided to give these winners a free journey to wherever they wished. They decided to go to Egypt, their dream country on the Mediterranean, to visit their relatives, and enjoy themselves on the shore. All the animals wished them a nice journey, and off they went.

The three turtles started their journey, looking forward to having a wonderful time. On their way, they gossiped and laughed at the other contestants who had dreamt of getting the title, especially Flatback, who looked like a rock had fallen on her back.





The turtles went on joking, spending their time diving and coming up to the surface for air, till at last they came to the Mediterranean. While they were playing, it turned dark. They hurriedly went to the surface to see what they thought was an eclipse. But they found it was a big oil slick floating on the surface that had leaked from a passing ship.

They were really upset. "Oh, no! This oil has spoilt my beautiful bright green colour. I can't go on like this. What will the Egyptian turtles think of me? A beggar coming from wonderland...", said Green. "It's not a problem for me. I am black in colour, so these stains won't damage my looks", said Leatherback. "Look, there is lots of algae. I will go and eat some, I'm starving", Green said.

She was heading straight for the algae, until the other two others stopped her, saying: "Hey wait! It is probably poisoned from this oil and it might kill you!". Hearing them say this, she returned at once, and they all went away to clean themselves.





They washed themselves, and resumed their journey. Along they swam, collecting some food on their way. Green had her algae and Leatherback caught some jellyfish, but Loggerhead didn't join them because the oil sickened her.

Leatherback noticed that some of the jellyfish were thin, tough and tasteless. Some of them were in sizes and colours that she had never seen before. Loggerhead looked at her and laughed whenever Leatherback was disgusted by the taste of a jellyfish.

Leatherback was annoyed with her friend for laughing at her, and for disbelieving what she was saying. But they went on all day swimming happily, eating, drinking, and looking for their relatives. At night-time, they stretched out on the shore of Marsa Matrouh.



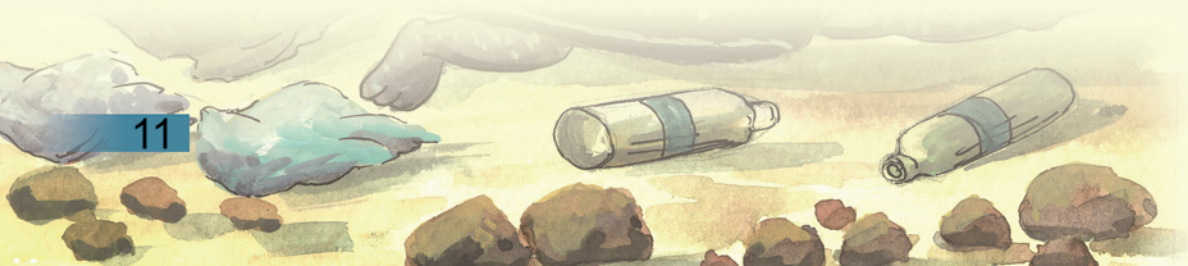


In the middle of the night Loggerhead and Green were woken by Leatherback's groans. She was very sick, her face was pale, and she was holding her belly. They tried to help her, but it was no use. So Loggerhead went looking for a doctor. She found the white gazelle who had been living in Matrouh for years and knew a great deal about curing animals.

After the gazelle had examined Leatherback, he said that she had food poisoning, and needed a purgative to clean her stomach out. As soon as Leatherback had taken the purgative, the gazelle was astonished to see that her stomach had been full of plastic bags of every colour and size. But Green told him that Leatherback had thought they were jellyfish, and didn't imagine that there were plastic bags in the water.

"This is a big problem on the shores. People are unaware of the problem, and throw plastic bags and empty water bottles into the sea, polluting it. This causes damage to the health of sea creatures, and this in turn affects man."

The gazelle then advised Leatherback to rest and to try and distinguish between jellyfish and plastic bags next time.

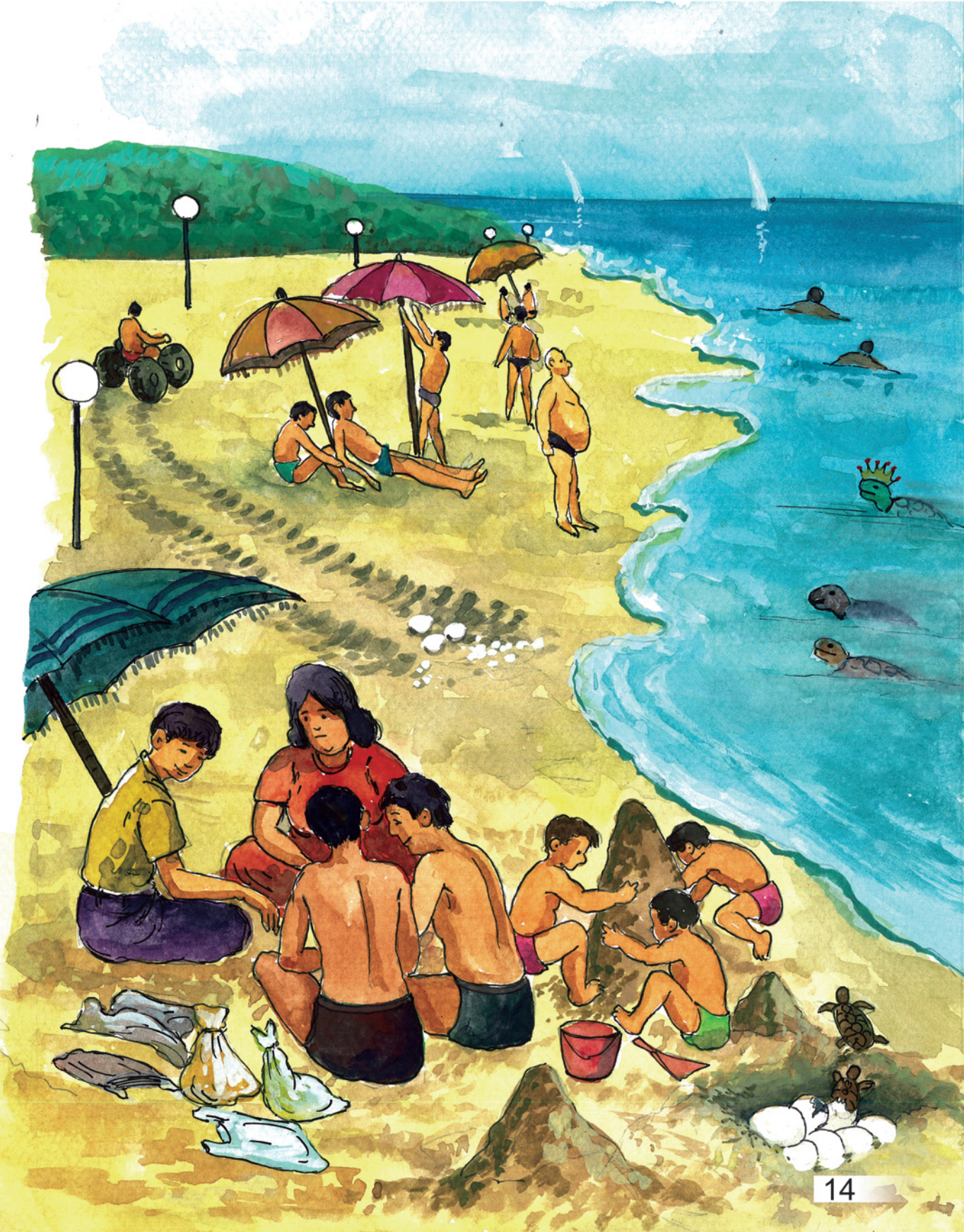




The turtles spent a whole day on the pure sands of the shores of Matrouh to rest from their trip and for Leatherback to recover. The next morning, they were ready to go and visit other shores.

"Alexandria", they decided, moving towards the east. As soon as they came to Alexandria, they found a lot of commotion. They raised their heads and tried to find out what was happening on the shore. There was a big crowd; children building castles on the sand and riding their bikes, old people sitting in the shade, eating hungrily, as if they had been starved for ages. As they ate, they threw the leftovers and plastic bags onto the shore. Leatherback was attacked by a fit of a rage as she watched this and remembered her pain and the purgative. She realized that this was the source of the plastic bags she had eaten.

The turtles were really shocked and afraid because they had noticed that there were some Egyptian turtle eggs in the sand on the beach. All the activity must break those eggs, and they then become vulnerable to being stolen or eaten by crabs and ants that live in the sand.

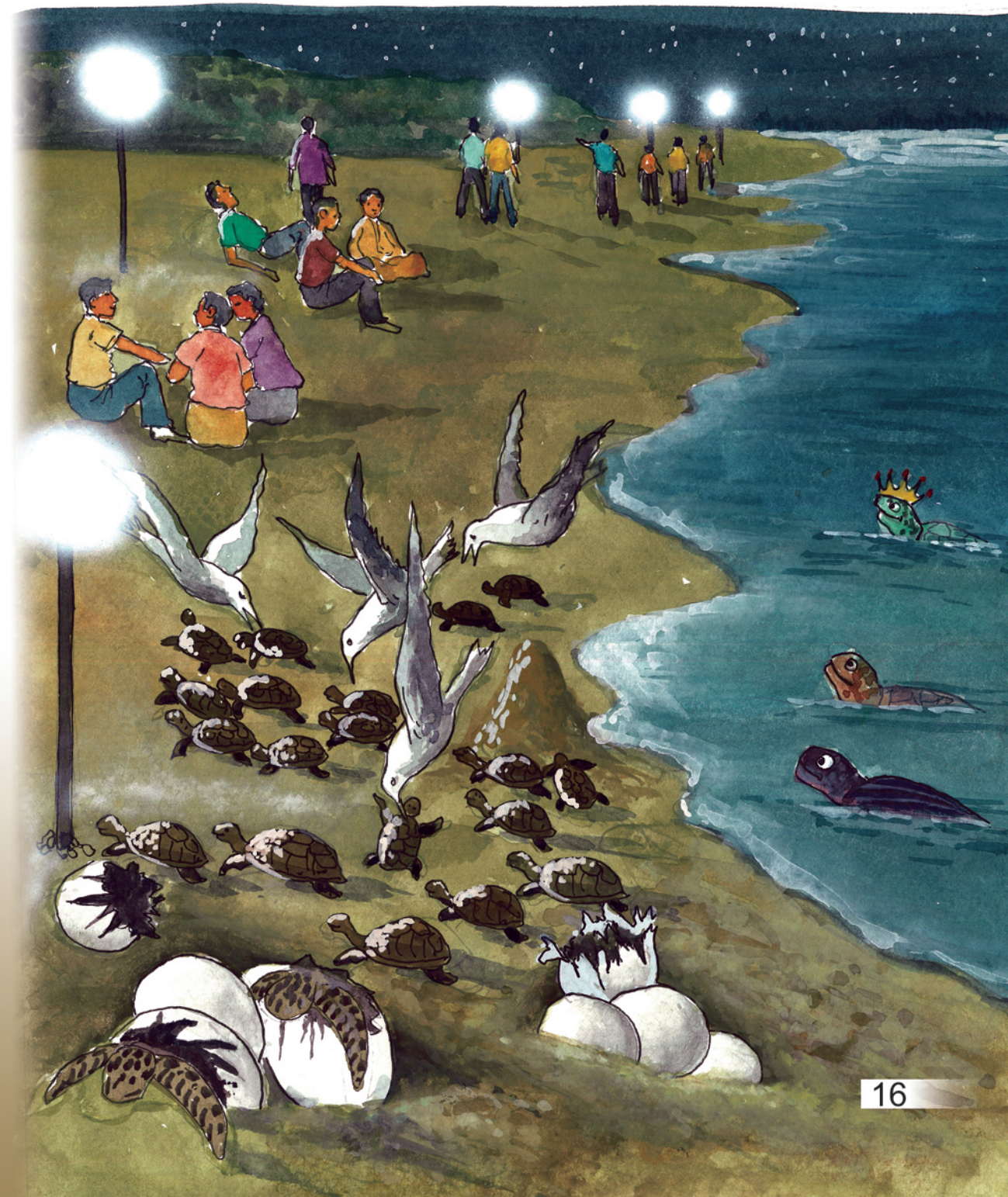




It was getting dark. The turtles were still eating jellyfish and algae, and watching what was happening on the shore. They had intended to save the eggs when the shore was empty. But they found that night-time became like day again, as lamps were turned on and light filled the beach. People didn't leave the shore, but instead others came. The turtles were astonished at the humans; they were awake all night, and reminded them of the bats on their home island. They realized that they would not be able to save any eggs and decided to go, sadly leaving the eggs behind.

But they stopped when they saw young turtles hatching out of the eggs. They were very happy to see them making their first steps towards the sea, guided by moonlight reflections on the water. But, to their horror, instead of heading towards the water, the young turtles went towards the bright lights of the lanterns. The rest of the babies couldn't reach the sea because of bits of sand castles and grooves made by bike wheels. In this bright light, the ravens and gulls could see the young clearly, and picked them all up and ate them in minutes.

The turtles had seen enough of human beings to decide to return to their safe island and end their journey.





On their way home, the three turtles noticed a spotlight. They went towards it, curious to find out what it was. As they came closer, nets were thrown over them. A large number of fish, shrimp and crabs was also caught in the nets. They were pulled onto the fishing boat that was emitting the light. At first, the turtles couldn't understand what was going on. They then heard some fish talking about the fishermen making nets with narrower holes to catch shrimp. They realized that they were on a fishing boat.

"Why do they catch us? Are we of any use to them?", wondered Green. "Of course you are! You are very valuable to them! That's why they catch you, even though it is forbidden in Egypt as well as in the whole world", replied a fish.

"Forbidden, what do you mean?", exclaimed Leatherback. "There is an international treaty banning the catching and trading of turtles. They introduced this because you turtles decreased in numbers and you were about to disappear", the fish said.

"Disappear? Like dinosaurs?", exclaimed Loggerhead

"Yes. That's why many countries signed this treaty, and among them was Egypt", said the fish. "And Egyptian law also bans the trade of turtles, for the same reason!", the fish added.

"Then I will sue those fishermen in international courts once I get out of here", said Green.

"Get out of here? You're dreaming", said the fish, laughing.





The three turtles were taken to Abo-Kir's fish market. They were dropped onto a table full of smelly fish that had been there since the day before. Miss Turtle fell among the fish, and her lovely green colour, that had helped her to get the title, turned black. Her friends watched as she covered her nose with her flipper and said: "What's this terrible smell?". "You are in a fish market, not a garden", said the other two, mockingly.

Green looked at herself pathetically, cleaning the dirt off her body. The seller doused her in water. She was very happy and grateful to him, until she understood why. He was cleaning them so that he could put them on sale. "How much are you selling this green turtle for?", a man asked the seller. "It has a pretty shell. It will look lovely hanging in the living room", the man thought to himself. "I want that one with the big head. It will make the best dinner for my family today, cooked with rice and salad. Its head will make a tasty soup", another man said. "And I will take the remaining one to drink its blood. Apparently it's very healthy.", said a third man.

From listening to the little discussions taking place between the seller and the people who came to buy, the turtles came to understand why people buy them, even though it's forbidden.



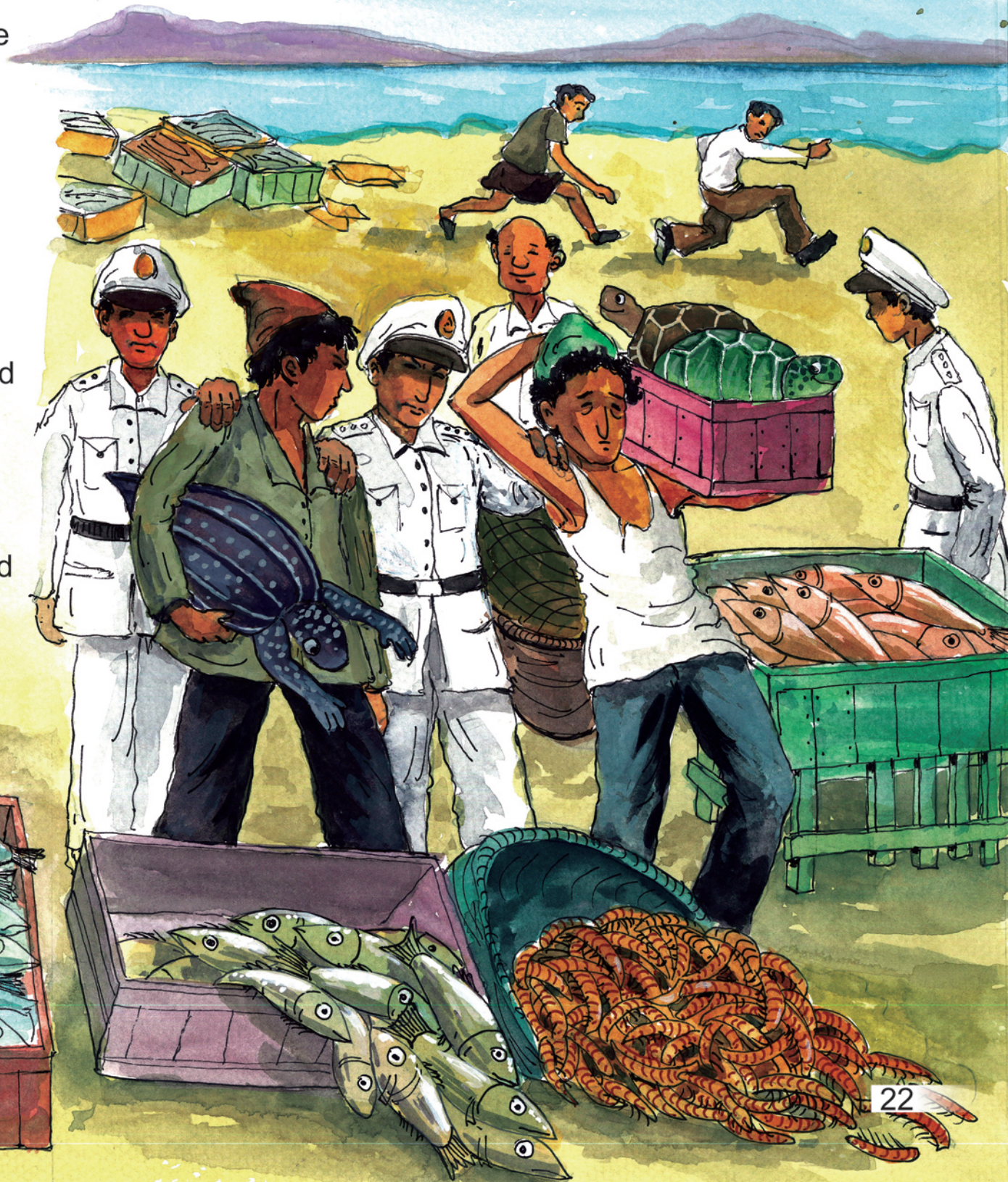


The buyers and seller argued over the price of the turtles. At last, the seller accepted 20 pounds per kilo. This came as a big shock to the turtles. First they were winners in a beauty contest, and now they were being sold at such a low price. While the turtles tried to encourage each other, a great hustle and bustle grew in the market. People were running in all directions, fish flying in the air and men hiding the turtles they had.

It was the police. They arrested the seller and collected the turtles. "We have arrested the seller and we've found three turtles on his table. What shall we do with them, sir?", said one of the policemen.

"Put them in a pool to be transported to Zaranik.", replied the other.

"Zaranik... God save us", said Green.





When they arrived at Zaranik, they noticed it was an amazing place on the Mediterranean. It was quiet and had no people damaging it. Lots of birds were soaring through the sky. The turtles were astonished to find such a great number of different birds, so they asked the policeman about this wonderful place.

"It is the Zaranik Protected Area near Arish, one of the most popular summer resorts. It's famous for having many migratory birds and is therefore one of the world's most interesting spots", answered the policeman.

The three turtles then strolled down the beach. They saw many eggs kept in incubators, protecting them until they hatched. They also saw the rangers sitting with the local Bedouin who lived there, telling them about the problems the turtles face and how they could disappear forever. The rangers tried to convince the locals that drinking the turtles' blood is not healthy, and that it is just a superstition that they must give up.

The Bedouin liked the idea of saving the turtles, and everybody released the ones they had. They decided not to catch them anymore, and to leave their eggs alone. They also agreed to keep the beach clean. On hearing this, the turtles decided to extend their stay in Zaranik to enjoy the beach and pass some time with their relatives that they finally found on the Zaranik beaches.

And you, my friends, won't you help to save the turtles?





## Do you know?

- The turtle is a reptile. It can live on land and in water).
- Turtles differ from tortoises (which we keep sometimes at home); their limbs are similar to fins to help them swim.
- The turtle breathes through lungs, and therefore needs to get to the water's surface to get air.
- Turtles swim in seas and oceans for long distances to look for food, sometimes up to 3000 km from their birthplace. They return after mating, guided by special systems, to lay their eggs.
- There are eight turtle species worldwide. They live in the warmer parts of the world. They vary slightly in size, colour and shape. They include: the Green, Hawksbill, Olive Ridley, Loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley, Leatherback, Black and Flatback turtles.
- Five of these species (the Green, Loggerhead, Leatherback, Hawksbill, and Olive Ridley) occur in Egypt.
- An adult turtle starts laying eggs between the ages of 30 and 50. It lays eggs once every 2 to 4 years. A female may lay eggs until the age of 70 to 100 years old, and how long she lives after that is unknown.
- A female lays between 80 and 120 eggs at a time, in a hole she makes in the sand. She then covers them with sand, where they remain until they hatch about 2 months later.
- Zaranik Protected Area is in the Suez Peninsula, near Arish on the Mediterranean coast.
- Zaranik is an important place for birds, since many migratory bird flocks pass over it, especially in the winter and spring. It is therefore popular worldwide for being a remarkable place to see birds.
- Many endangered animals are found in Zaranik: among them, the turtles. It is considered an important place for safeguarding the eggs of the Green and Loggerhead turtles.
- Due to being an important place for migrating birds and a place with a number of endangered animals, it was declared as a Protected Area in 1985.



## Believe it or not

- A turtle can live for 200 years.
- After laying its eggs in a hole, the turtle makes a number of similar holes before it returns to sea. This is to confuse their enemies.
- On her way back to the water, after laying her eggs, tears come into the female's eyes. This is to clean them from the sand. When fishermen or visitors see this, they think the turtles are crying from leaving their eggs behind and not being able to look after their babies after they hatch. Ecologists say that turtles produce more intense tears than crocodiles. In spite of this, man uses crocodiles' rather than turtles' tears in his proverbs.
- The pharaohs used to use turtle shells as shields during their journeys to the sea.
- Only 2 or 3 turtles out of 10000 survive to maturity. This is because of their natural enemies (foxes, birds, and various fish) that kill them from the moment they come out of their eggs until maturity.
- Some jellyfish secrete fatal poisons that may kill a person in less than 4 minutes. In spite of this, turtles are able to eat them with their beak-like mouth without harm.
- Jellyfish are likely to increase in numbers due to the decrease in turtle numbers.
- Recent research shows that turtles have a great ability to determine their location precisely by the help of the earth's magnetic field. Scientists have shown that turtles are able to go around the world using a compass-like system equivalent to the GPS.

## What can I do to protect the Turtle?

- Don't throw waste (especially plastic bags) onto the shore. If you find any, collect it up.
- Don't bother a turtle while it is laying its eggs because its eggs will die after it escapes you. Don't use strong lights.
- Avoid driving cars on the beach, because they compress the sand. This makes it hard for the young turtles to dig themselves out and return to water.
- Don't touch the nest holes you find on the beach.



# Questions

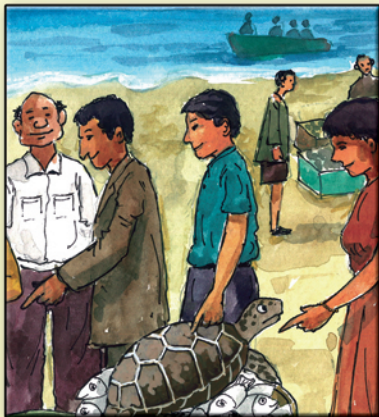
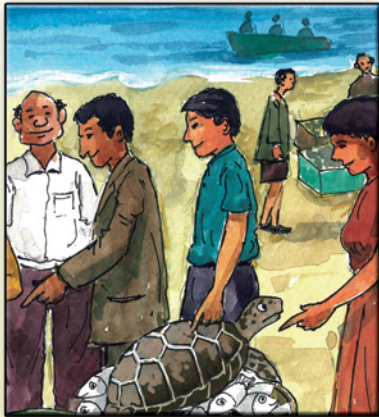
1. How many turtles participated in the contest?
2. Which turtle eats jellyfish?
3. Which turtle won the title?
4. Where did the queen and the runner-ups decide to make their journey to?
5. What upset the turtles and damaged their beauty while they were swimming in the Mediterranean?
6. How did the turtles find the shores of Alexandria?
7. What made returning to the sea impossible for the young turtles?
8. Why is it forbidden to catch or trade in turtles?
9. Where did the policemen take the three turtles to?

# Miss Turtle's Journey to Egypt



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BLACK - OIL - JOURNEY - BOAT - NET - MARKET

J	C	O	N	T	E	S	T		A
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The Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs,  
This work is a part of the BioMAP project,  
funded by The Italian government  
in cooperation with the UNDP.



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