

Mairi Eyres (Natural Sciences) – Turtle conservation, Kefalonia, Greece 2018

This summer I spent two weeks volunteering with the organisation Wildlife Sense in Kefalonia. Wildlife Sense help conserve and research the loggerhead turtles of the Mediterranean, as well as educating tourists and locals about the threats facing these turtles. The aim of the trip was to gain some hands-on experience with this type of work before I start my Animal Biology course this year.

I spent the night before my flight trying to sleep against the wall at Stansted airport, so the first thing I did when I arrived in Kefalonia was to claim a bed in the Wildlife Sense dorm room and set up my sleeping bag. As it turned out, an unusual sleeping schedule was to be the running theme of my stay in Kefalonia; early morning surveys and night shifts were interspersed with daytime naps – especially when it was too hot to do anything but sleep or go for a quick dip in the sea.

Morning surveys involved leaving at 6:20 each morning to cycle to the beaches we had been assigned. The aim was to record GPS data for the ends of the beaches (in order to map how the size of each beach changed with time), and also to count the number of baby turtle tracks that had appeared in the night.

If there were more than 20 tracks from one nest then it was considered likely that more would come out during the day. This would be far from ideal since Kefalonia's hot climate and beautiful beaches are well-known for attracting lots of tourists. A beach packed with holidaymakers is a dangerous place for a turtle less than the size of a tennis ball.

For this reason, if a hatching event was suspected to occur during the day, the Wildlife Sense team would excavate the nest early in the morning (when there were few tourists around and it was a lot cooler). We would then place any baby turtles we found into a 12m long trench to the sea. We let them walk along this trench so they could imprint on the specific beach they had come from. This ensured they would return to the same location to lay their eggs in the future.

I loved watching them crawl across the sand and into sea, but it was heart-wrenching to think that only about one in a thousand hatchlings make it to adulthood.

My favourite part of the trip had to be sleeping out on the beaches at night. Night shifts involved checking the nests for hatchlings every hour and releasing any we found into a trench away from the light pollution (most beaches had beach bars or streetlamps nearby which disorientated the hatchlings). It was incredible to be lying out underneath so many stars with the chance of turtles popping up at any moment.

All in all, it was a very enjoyable and insightful trip. I'm very grateful to Pembroke for funding it and to Wildlife Sense for allowing me to volunteer with them. I loved getting to know the other volunteers, carrying out conservation work and learning more about turtle ecology.

