

## **Maya Kaye – Turtles in Malaysia, Summer 2013**

In July 2013 I travelled to South East Asia in order to partake in the Lang Tengah Turtle Watch project. In its first year of operation, the project's main aim is to save Turtles inhabiting Pulau Lang Tengah, a small island off of the East Coast of Malaysia, and the surrounding area, from extinction. The project began officially in April 2013, with a few local volunteers clearing a small area of the jungle to set up camp. The land on which the camp exists is owned by Hayati Mokhtar, who provides volunteers with food and equipment for shelter.

I was working with 7 other volunteers, all from the University of Cambridge. We would patrol two of the island's beaches; the only two beaches where turtles would feasibly land as the third beach was so developed that turtles would not find a suitable place to bury their eggs. The first of these beaches, 'Turtle Bay', adjoined to our camp. The second of these beaches, 'Langsari', was larger and further away. Beaches needed to be patrolled from 8pm until 8am each day, so as a group we divided up the hours of the night into 'shifts'. During these shifts, the volunteers on duty would record any turtle landings, egg-layings, or hatchings.

Turtle landings were recorded to collect data for the project. Before the project officially began, Hayati was told that the project would not be necessary as turtles were already close to extinct on the island. As can be shown by the research we have now collected, this is not the case. Although during my time on the island we only saw 'Green' turtles, suggesting that Hawksbill turtles no longer inhabit the area, the species is not yet extinct in this area. Once the project has been established for over a year, this data can be shown to the Malaysian Department of Fisheries, and the WWF, who may be able to set up a more formal project.

Similarly, we would record all information relating to when we saw a turtle laying eggs. When a turtle laid eggs on Langsari beach, we would dig the nest up (in the way in which a WWF representative had taught us) and carefully move the eggs to Turtle bay, where we would rebury them. This was important for two reasons. Firstly, this enabled us to monitor and protect the nests during the day time, from both poachers and animals who would dig up the eggs to eat. Secondly, when the turtle eggs hatch, baby turtles are attracted to any light they can see. As Langsari beach has two hotels on it, the baby turtles are attracted by the hotel lights when they hatch, meaning they do not make it to sea. Instead, these turtles get eaten by creatures on the beach, or do not develop enabling them to swim.

One difficulty was overcoming the problem of poachers. Turtle eggs, although illegal, are a delicacy in Malaysia and other parts of South East Asia. Eggs can be sold on the black market for up to £1 each; a lot considering a single nest may contain around 100 eggs, and the poverty suffered by those feeling the need to conduct such activities in the first place. Almost every night we encountered local fishermen, or young men working at the hotels on the island, trying to poach eggs. At first, tensions were high. We never had problems with violence, as reported elsewhere in the world, although we were asked to produce legal documentation on multiple occasions to prove that we had the right to protect the eggs. Our strategy with the poachers on the island was befriending them during the daytimes, and helping them find alternative ways of using the turtle landings to produce money on the island. Soon, the former-poachers started to bring tourists to visit our camp and learn about the work we were doing, as well as organising tours to come with us on patrol in the evening. Although it may be that we have given these men another profit-making avenue, it is doubtful that if the project were to now stop that these people would not continue to practice their age-long trade of poaching turtle eggs.

Although very small, I felt as though I was able to make a positive impact on the environment. This, along with having the opportunity to educate both locals and tourists about the natural environment, and living completely primitively is an experience which has taught me a lot. I would like to thank Pembroke College for the contribution they made to my flight, enabling me to partake in the project.