Turtles

There is a stretch of beach in Cyprus. Cyprus is a Mediterranean island. It has has been home to Green and Loggerhead turtles for thousands of years.

Tiny turtles have just hatched on Lara Beach. They strain against the surf to reach the Mediterranean Sea. Then they embark on their life's journey.

In 20 to 30 years they will return. They'll be back at this exact location to lay their own eggs.

These turtles were hunted to near extinction in the first half of the last century. Now the Mediterranean's endangered Loggerhead and Green turtles are making a comeback. This is thanks to pioneering conservation efforts. That's according to Cypriot marine biologists.

Those efforts began in 1978. Back then, there were just 300 turtle nests on the island's beaches where the reptiles return to lay their eggs. The population has grown to around 1,100 nests last year. That's according to Andreas Demetropoulos. He is the founder and co-head of a turtle conservation program. It is under the island-nation's Fisheries and Marine Research Department.

That may not sound a lot, but the turtles' reproductive cycles stretch out as long as three decades. So the results are "quite spectacular," said Demetropoulos.

This increase is especially encouraging for the Green turtle. It lays its eggs in only two countries. These countries are Turkey and European Union member Cyprus. There are only about 1,500 female Green turtles that lay eggs in those two countries. This is less than the 6,000 female Loggerheads — or Careta Careta — that lay eggs across the Mediterranean.

Cyprus has 200-300 Green turtles that lay eggs. The number for Loggerheads is more than double that. That's according to Myroula Hadjichristophorou. She is a biologist and conservation program co-head.

Cyprus instituted its conservation program long before any other EU member and that has paid off, said Hadjichristoforou. Efforts include guarding against the turtles' main predator — foxes. Efforts also included passing crucial legislation in 1989 that allowed conservationists to protect two key beaches in the island's west and northwest. This kept curious locals and tourists at bay.

Before this, residents would camp on the beach and fire up barbecues. They had little concern for the turtles. But over time, Hadjichristophorou says the region has built up a conservationist culture — from schoolkids to adults. Now folks who spot something like an injured turtle notify the authorities immediately.

Turtles have been around for 200 million years on Earth but have called the Mediterranean home only for about 10,000 years, said Hadjichristophorou. Remarkably, the turtles' have their own ingrained "biological GPS.” It brings them back to lay their eggs to the same beaches that their ancestors chose thousands of years ago.

"When people come here with their families, their children, they see the babies coming out of their nests, this is something that they will never forget," said Hadjichristophorou.