ENDANGERED HAWKSBILL TURTLES NOW HATCHING ON ABU DHABI’S SAADIYAT ISLAND

FIRST NEST OF SEASON HATCHES IN FRONT OF MAJOR LUXURY RESORT

Abu Dhabi, 9 July 2012 – The eagerly anticipated hatching of the first Hawksbill Sea Turtle nest on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island has occurred in the dune conservation area fronting the spectacular five-star The St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort Abu Dhabi, with its young brood making a successful return to warm Arabian Gulf waters.

The hatching was discovered by keen-eyed beach staff of The St Regis, who spotted baby turtle tracks leading from the Saadiyat Dune Protection Zone to the shore, and alerted the environment team of Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) which monitors the turtles under its Hawksbill Sea Turtle Conservation Programme.

“We’ve been checking the beach first thing every morning since the nest was laid,” said Shiva Kumar, from the Leisure & Spa team for St.Regis Saadiyat Island Resort Abu Dhabi. “TDIC gave us training on what to look out for and how to identify turtle tracks, and they told us that it took between 50 and 60 days for a turtle nest to hatch.”

Shiva and St.Regis beach lifeguard Sunil Shetty, both from India, were the first to spot Saadiyat Island’s first nest of the season had hatched.

“Shiva and I were conducting our routine morning beach check, and suddenly we came across hundreds of tiny turtle tracks making their way from the dune area to the shore,” explained a thrilled Sunil. “It really makes you happy to see, we’ve been keeping an eye on the nest for the past two months and making sure it remained protected - so in a way we feel like those little turtles were part of the family.”

With almost paternal responsibility, Shiva and Sunil assisted TDIC’s environment manager, Millie Plowman, to dig the nest up in the sand to enable a full inventory to be conducted, as part of the official the monitoring programme which began early 2010 and which has recorded 650 eggs successfully hatched on Saadiyat to date.
“We now have another 65 successful hatchings to add to our records,” said Millie, “This is a fairly normal result for a nest of around 80-100 eggs, as some of the eggs don’t fully develop while in the nest.

“Once one egg hatches, the entire nest hatches and it’s quite a spectacular sight if you’re able to witness a brood of baby turtles popping their heads out of the sand after burrowing their way up from their underground nest. The baby turtles then make their way to the shore, orienting themselves in the dark by the glow off the water. Once in the water the baby turtles swim for a full 24 hours to get as far away from the shore as possible, powered by the reserves of the egg yolk they’ve ingested. Then they just float amongst the currents to be taken out into deeper waters to mature.

“We’re not really sure how they spend their time out in the deep seas, but we do know that female turtles return to the beach where they were born around 30 years later to nest.”

Hospitality partners operating on Saadiyat Beach have fully co-operated with TDIC’s Hawksbill Sea Turtle Conservation programme with many of their staff - including lifeguards, beach cleaners and beach security patrols - being fully trained by TDIC’s environment team to look for and report turtles and nests and how to manage the beach during the nesting season.

“Everyone has been enthusiastically involved with the programme since inception and have embraced the opportunity to be able to directly contribute to the conservation of Saadiyat’s environment and wildlife,” said John Pelling, General Manager, The St.Regis Saadiyat Island Resort, Abu Dhabi.

“We have also worked hand-in-hand with TDIC to spread the word amongst our guests who have readily respected the beach access restrictions and shown great interest in learning more about the island’s conservation programmes.”

TDIC’s Hawksbill Sea Turtle Conservation programme is the only one of its kind in the Arabian Gulf, and has seen the company restrict resort development on Saadiyat Beach to create a buffer zone serving as a physical barrier between construction and operations and the Saadiyat Dune Protection Zone nesting beach.

“It has been our aim to not only to maintain and protect existing environmental and social assets on Saadiyat Island, but to achieve enhancement of these for future Abu Dhabi generations,” said Denis O’Connor, Executive Director – Operations, TDIC, “Initiatives such as turtle and mangrove conservation and sustainability guidelines for construction and operations, have resulted in Saadiyat Island being recognised as a leading example of how large-scale investment projects can be delivered while enhancing and protecting the Gulf’s environment.”
A pristine, natural island lying just 500 metres off the UAE capital's coast, Saadiyat is being developed, by TDIC, into one of the world's leading residential, cultural and tourism destinations. Saadiyat's master plan includes the Cultural District, envisioned to become a significant global arts hub featuring premier cultural institutions such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Zayed National Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum.

TDIC has embedded sustainability principles throughout the Saadiyat Island development, with the first phase culminating in the opening of the Saadiyat Beach Golf Course, the five-star The St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort Abu Dhabi and Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel and Villas, and the Monte Carlo Beach Club, Saadiyat.

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Photo Captions:

1. TDIC’s Environment Manager, Millie Plowman looks on ready to take inventory while St.Regis lifeguard, Sunil Shetty digs for the remaining egg shells of the first nest to hatch on Saadiyat Island.

2. Shiva Kumar and Sunil Shetty of The St Regis Saadiyat Island Resort Abu Dhabi were the first to spot the baby Hawksbill turtle tracks – pictured here with Millie Plowman, TDIC’s environment manager.

3. The give-away baby turtle tracks.

Video
Footage of Hawksbill Turtles hatching on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island is available to view through our VisitAbuDhabi YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wC1vOOkOGA. This 3 minute video footage is available for distribution on request.
ABOUT ABU DHABI TOURISM & CULTURE AUTHORITY

Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority conserves and promotes the heritage and culture of Abu Dhabi emirate and leverages them in the development of a world-class, sustainable destination of distinction which enriches the lives of visitors and residents alike. The Authority manages the emirate’s tourism sector and markets the destination internationally through a wide range of activities aimed at attracting visitors and investment. Its policies, plans and programmes relate to the preservation of heritage and culture, including protecting archaeological and historical sites and to developing museums, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Zayed National Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. The Authority supports intellectual and artistic activities and cultural events to nurture a rich cultural environment and honour the emirate’s heritage. A key Authority role is to create synergy in the destination’s development through close co-ordination with its wide-ranging stakeholder base.

www.visitabudhabi.ae

ABOUT TDIC

Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) is a master developer of major tourism destinations in Abu Dhabi, the largest of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates, and a key contributor to its economic and cultural progress.

TDIC is behind some of Abu Dhabi’s most prestigious projects including two major destinations - Saadiyat, a natural island off the coast of Abu Dhabi which will house the world’s largest single concentration of premier cultural institutions including the Zayed National Museum, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi; and Desert Islands, which will be one of the world’s largest nature-based tourism destinations.

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About TDIC’s Hawksbill Sea Turtle Conservation Programme

Hawksbill sea turtles are the original guests of Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island, and have continued to nest on the destination’s sweeping beachfront throughout the island’s development into a world-class destination with the nine-kilometre Saadiyat Beach playing host to several Hawksbill turtle nests every year.

TDIC’s Hawksbill Sea Turtle Conservation programme, the only one of its kind in the Arabian Gulf, has ensured that the now globally critically endangered Hawksbill turtles continue to nest on the island’s sweeping beachfront throughout development which has culminated in the opening of the Saadiyat Beach Golf Course, the five-star The St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort Abu Dhabi and Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel and Villas, and the Monte Carlo Beach Club.
The programme has seen the company restrict resort development on Saadiyat Beach to at least 60 metres back from the seaward edge of the coastal dunes, creating a buffer zone which serves as a physical barrier between construction and operations and the Saadiyat Dune Protection Zone nesting beach. Operational guidelines further protect the nesting sites by restricting beach access to pedestrians who reach the beach via elevated boardwalks, which prevent people from walking through the delicate dune system and potentially disturbing the nests.

Other TDIC measures for the protection of the Saadiyat coastal dune system cover lighting guidelines and assessments of operational developments, and a dedicated environmental resource that monitors and audits properties operating on Saadiyat. For example, during nesting season, night lighting is reduced to aid the hatchling turtles’ orientation towards the sea, nests are logged and avoided by beach maintenance crews, and all beach furniture is moved off the beach at night. TDIC is currently producing educational signage and information leaflets at the hotels and beach club on Saadiyat to promote the protection of the turtles among the island’s guests. Turtle information is being placed in hotel rooms and guest engagement is being encouraged through kids’ clubs on the beach.

Hawksbill turtles nest on a number of islands in the UAE, with Saadiyat’s deep sand beaches and natural dune system beyond the high tide line providing them with a good nesting habitat. Just how long turtles have been nesting on Saadiyat is unknown, however after 30 years, breeding Hawksbill females return to their birth place to lay their eggs. Since TDIC’s monitoring programme began in early 2010, some 650 eggs have hatched successfully on Saadiyat.