Generating knowledge on dugongs, their critical habitats and threat reduction measures in North West Madagascar

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Northwest Madagascar is potentially one of the last refuges for dugongs, yet there is currently little known about their distribution, population status and key habitat. This lack of baseline information hampers the effective implementation of conservation measures tailored to respond to the increasing number of threats acting on dugongs and seagrass in the region. The project is focused from Nosy Mitsio to Mahajanga, and aims to: 1) generate new information on critical dugong habitat and population distribution, 2) investigate specific threats to dugong populations, 3) identify and test tailored conservation strategies, 4) communicate the results to key stakeholders and the scientific community. A combination of seagrass habitat mapping using high resolution satellite imagery, passive acoustic monitoring and community interviews are being used to determine dugong presence, distribution, prime habitat and main threats in the study area. The seagrass mapping and community interview surveys were used initially to inform the placement of acoustic recorders in potential dugong hotspots. A total area of 28,000 km² was mapped and identified as high, low or zero probability of seagrass. Preliminary results from the community interview surveys in the north showed that the majority of dugong sightings were from July to September and sightings or catches were low or nonexistent in most years. The highest number of dugong catches was in 2014 with 4 dugongs caught in nets. Preliminary acoustic analyses have found no dugong vocalizations. So far these results suggest that, despite apparent vast and healthy seagrass zones, dugong populations have been greatly depleted due to hunting pressures. The results from this research will be used to develop an outreach and conservation strategy on dugongs, seagrass habitats and threats they face, and community based conservation measures will be developed and trialed in identified key areas.