ARTICLES

Education & Awareness – Harnessing the Power of Play

Anna Stamatiou[1,2]

[1]MEDASSET, Athens, Greece
[2]Animal Action Greece, Athens, Greece (anna@stamatiou.net)

"One's own powers of making sense of the world are powers that develop naturally through action in the world."
Matthew B Crawford, Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

One of the enduring ambitions of conservation NGOs has been (and still is) to build a generation of young people whose attitudes towards the environment in general will be more caring and responsible than those of their parents. Whether we highlight the plight of rhinos, blue macaws, or sea turtles, treating them as emblematic species, our aim is to affect the way people, and young people in particular, think. So, how do we reach them?

One way might be to intervene in the school day and how they are taught. Most teachers know that children respond with enthusiasm and are more likely to retain what they have learned when they have been involved in *action* than when they have been the passive recipients of information. That is why NGOs go to the trouble and expense of producing participatory lesson plans and promote them to schools. Nevertheless, the traditional classroom, with its chronic under-staffing, regimentations and hierarchies is not, in general, famous for being a place where the young are offered opportunities to make discoveries of their own (either about the world around them or about themselves) through 'doing', particularly not classrooms in state-funded schools.

But what if the feeling of being *taught* can be bypassed altogether? What if we, conservationists, can sneak our messages into *entertainment* (whether in a classroom setting or outside it) and produce the behaviour and priority changes we want to see without relying on fear and a sense of impending doom as drivers? Could our attitude and behaviour-changing aims then have a better chance of success?

My own experience of educational outreach work for MEDASSET (www.medasset.org) and ANIMAL ACTION GREECE (www.animalactiongreece.org) has frequently demonstrated what an effective tool the human *impulse to play* can be, and the work I have done to conceive and create five different games for children has aimed to mobilise that impulse to win hearts and minds for both nature conservation and the welfare of animals.

"TEAM TURTLE", is an online game that aims to cast the players as *active protectors* of hatchling sea turtles, albeit in a virtual space, and, through accumulating points when the young reptiles successfully reach the breaking waves, to become *responsible* for an underwater seascape that, though it seems initially barren, can gradually be transformed into a "Marine Scene" that teems with life and colour. (Fig. 1). The fate of each player's underwater world is in their hands, an ownership that generates emotional connection. Behaviour change professionals know that feeling strongly about anything is absolutely key when it comes to making an experience *memorable*. In the game, there are marauding ghost crabs to avoid, litter to drag into a bin, and deep tyre tracks in the sand to fill in. ("TEAM TURTLE" is available to play online free of charge and is hosted on the website of MEDASSET https://medasset.org/portfolio-item/team-turtle/).



Figure 1. TEAM TURTLE's "Marine Scene" at the start (above) and end (below) of the game. Realised by Emelia Jones and The Lucky Lot.

However, any experience that is mediated by a screen is essentially distancing. The ambition of the games that followed has been to engage players more directly, offering an opportunity to be not only *emotionally* but also *physically* involved in events as they unfold, making the games (together with the messages they convey), as 'real' and therefore, once again, as *memorable* as they can be. "CARAPACE RACE" (Fig. 2), is large-scale, floor-based and packed with sensory input. Four, sea turtle 'players' leave their natal beach and journey towards the completion of their life cycle, encountering threats as they go. The turtles collect or lose turtle 'eggs' along the way, and the winner is the one that arrives at the nesting beach with the greatest number of eggs to lay. As in other educational games, 'Chance' cards provide fun fact-style sea turtle knowledge, but what makes this game different is its scale and the number of 3D characters that the players are encouraged to handle and, in anarchic interventions of their own, invent mini narratives about. Food items, octopus, squid, hermit crab, and jellyfish help the turtles on their way, while a hungry seagull, shark, or ghost crab might attack and hinder them. Fishing nets can physically entangle a 'player' turtle and slow its progress. The action takes place in the real world, in real time. Just like it used to in the Ancient Greek dramas!



Figure 2. "CARAPACE RACE" is played by primary school children in Chios, Greece. Illustrated by Katerina Ntarlagianni.

"ADESPOTAKIA", (Fig. 3) is a tabletop game centring on the life of stray dogs. It was followed by another floor-based game, featuring street cats (Fig. 4); both created for ANIMAL ACTION GREECE. Like "CARAPACE RACE", the cat-themed game, "NIAOY-NIAOY", also mobilises young players' desire to handle and collect satisfyingly tactile, moving pieces. Players are challenged to feed 3D fish to 3D cats and amass as many of each as they can.



Figure 3. "ADESPOTAKIA" (or "Little Strays"), a tabletop game about finding a loving 'forever home' for a stray dog. Illustrated by Katerina Ntarlagianni



Figure 4. "NIAOY-NIAOY" is a floor-based game about finding and feeding stray cats. Illustrated by Anna Karakalou

Most recently, "INTO THE BLUE" (for MEDASSET, Fig. 5) abandons a formal game structure altogether and simply invites participants to move through an 'underwater' environment, discovering a range of marine species that live in the Mediterranean Sea – naturally including sea turtles – but also encountering items of litter that have no business to be there. A Leader/Animateur encourages the youngsters to consider what they have found and, if time is available, to take part in a related activity, such as making their own images or telling a story.



Figure 5. "INTO THE BLUE" encourages a free style of engagement with the creatures and objects depicted on its translucent, suspended panels. Illustrated by Anna Stamatiou and fabricated by Kostas Thomopoulos.

The guiding principle of all five games is that players should be encouraged imaginatively to enter into the experience of each species – whether that might be a sea turtle or a companion animal – and, through the structure and chance events in each game, but also – crucially – through their own interactions, questions and individual contributions, feel a connection to the life of each.

As with every activity an NGO undertakes, evaluating outcomes matters. Did anything change as a result of our effort? Where

games are concerned this is exceptionally challenging. Arguably, it is not enough to find out what a group knew before and what it now knows about, say, sea turtles. After all, simply knowing something doesn't necessarily lead us to change our behaviour (think about smoking or drink driving). We need to know whether we have really reached hearts and minds. Because this is so hard to do and because we instinctively feel that education outreach is 'a good thing' we keep on doing it. In doing so, we are essentially making a leap of faith.

Nevertheless, behavioural science does have insights to share… it tells us it almost doesn't matter how often we are *told* something; we remember most vividly and trust most confidently what we have *experienced for ourselves*. Once each of us has felt (even if only imaginatively) what it might be like to be threatened, cast out, pursued, hungry, or trapped, something inside us shifts, and a space for empathy opens up. Presenting an opportunity for that shift to take place, and for a seed of empathy to be planted, is what the games and activities I create are *for*.

In the liberal democracies of the western world, what the voting public thinks and feels matters. The European elections of 2024 once again showed that conservation messages are simply not penetrating the public consciousness effectively enough to translate into wins for 'green' parties at the ballot box. This means that politicians feel free to allow action on climate change and other matters to slip down the agenda with impunity. So really, our only hope is to work to create a generation of voters that cares more passionately than ours has done about environmental issues. In short, we need to… raise our game!

ISSN 2752-7247

MedTurtle Bulletin



Issue
7
May 2025

Managing Editor

ALan F. Rees

Editorial Board

Aliki Panagopoulou
ARCHELON, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece, Greece & The Leatherback Trust, USA

Angela Mastrogiacomo
Mediterranean Turtle Research and Conservation Society (MEDTRACS), Cyprus

Doğan Sözbilen
Pamukkale University, Turkey

Fulvio Maffucci
Department of Marine Animal Conservation and Public Engagement, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Italy

Kostas Papafitsoros
ARCHELON, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece, Greece & Queen Mary University of London, UK

Manel Ben Ismail
Wave of Change Hub, Iberostar Group, Tunisia

Matic Jančič
Department of Biodiversity, University of Primorska, Slovenia

Onur Candan
Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics, Ordu University, Turkey

Pilar Santidrian Tomillo
Institut Mediterrani d'Estudis Avançats (CSIC-UIB), Spain

Robin T.E. Snape
Society for Protection of Turtles, Northern Cyprus[1]

Sami Karaa
National Institute of Sciences and Technologies of the Sea, Tunisia

Şükran Yalçın Özdilek
Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey

Vilma Piroli
University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania

Advisory Board

Mouloud Benabdi *Algeria*

Bojan Lazar *Croatia*

Simon Demetropoulos *Cyprus*

Basem Rabia *Egypt*

Françoise Claro *France*

Dimitris Margaritoulis *Greece*

Yaniv Levy *Israel*

Sandra Hochscheid Italy

Ali Bedreddine *Lebanon*

Almokhtar Saied *Libya*

Carmen Mifsud *Malta*

Mustapha Aksissou *Morocco*

Carlos Carreras *Spain*

Adib Saad *Syria*

Imed Jribi *Tunisia*

Yakup Kaska *Turkey*

Lobna Ben Nakhla *SPA/RAC*

Paolo Casale *MTSG*

[1] a de facto state that comprises the north-eastern portion of the island of Cyprus. It is only recognised by Turkey and considered by the international community to be part of the Republic of Cyprus. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus