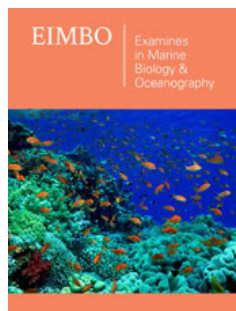



Amid the Israeli War on the Gaza Strip – Palestine, Famine is Driving Gazans to Eat the Meat of Globally Endangered Sea Turtles

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Abstract

The Mediterranean waters of Palestine are home to numerous sea turtle species. Due to the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, described as a genocidal and ethnically motivated war that began on October 7, 2023, and the accompanying blockade and famine, Gazans have been driven to consume sea turtle meat to meet their animal protein needs. This study highlights how this worsening famine has driven Gazans to consume the meat of globally endangered sea turtles. This dirty and immoral Israeli war, which used deliberate starvation as a weapon, drove the Gazans to seek out any food they could find. Gazans resorted to eating various types of herbs, grasses, and animal feed. They also hunted various species of terrestrial wildlife, including birds and mammals. Eventually, they turned to the sea to catch some of its creatures, including endangered sharks, dolphins, and sea turtles, for food. Till now, the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta* Linnaeus, 1758) and the Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas* Linnaeus, 1758) are the only species caught and eaten by Gazans. Sea turtle meat was sold in local markets for \$30 or more per kilogram. Many of those lucky enough to find sea turtle meat were tasting it for the first time in their lives, never imagining they would have to eat sea turtles just to survive. Many media outlets and social media platforms have been competing to cover the incident of Gazans eating endangered sea turtles. Palestinian forums hope that the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip will end and that Gazans will enjoy food security, enabling them to sustainably protect sea turtles and other endangered marine creatures.

Keywords: Endangered sea turtles; Israeli war; Blockade; Famine; Protein deprivation; Sea turtle Meat consumption; Media coverage

Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea is home to at least six of the world's seven known species of sea turtles [1]. Those include the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta* Linnaeus, 1758), Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas* Linnaeus, 1758), Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea* Vandelli, 1761), Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata* Linnaeus, 1766), Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii* Garman, 1880), and Olive Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea* Eschscholtz, 1829). Almost all sea turtle species are considered endangered, they range from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List [2,3]. Of those mentioned, the Loggerhead and the Green Sea Turtles are common breeders in the region [4,5]. Threats facing sea turtle species worldwide include fisheries and incidental capture, fishermen's nets that lack turtle excluder devices, over-exploitation, commercial exploitation of eggs, vessel strikes, pollution and marine debris, coastal and marine development, loss and destruction of nesting habitats by humans, artificial lighting, predation on nests and young, introduction of exotic predators, and climate change [6-8]. Efforts to protect and conserve sea turtles require international cooperation because these endangered creatures roam vast areas of the world's oceans and coasts while migrating or nesting [2].

Some Palestinian studies [9-17] have indicated the presence of three species of sea turtles in the Mediterranean ecosystem of the Gaza Strip; namely, the Loggerheads, Greens, and Leatherbacks; with the Loggerhead is the most abundant species. However, cases of catch, by-catch and stranding have been recorded in certain circumstances along the 42km long coast of the Gaza Strip. Consumption of sea turtle meat by Gazans has been rare in recent decades, largely due to the fact that Gazans are reluctant to eat it given the availability of animal protein, such as white and red meat [14-16]. With the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, which international observers, human rights activists, politicians and military personnel have described as a war of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the intensification of the blockade and famine affecting the Strip's population, animal protein, essential for building the body, tissues, and cells [18], has become scarce. Protein poverty, diseases, epidemics, and immunodeficiency diseases have spread among Gaza's population [19,20], who, since the beginning of the war, have begun searching for alternatives to satisfy their hunger, particularly, and to a lesser extent, seafood, such as fish, sea turtles, and even dolphins, given the closure of the sea to lucrative fishing operations due to the Israeli occupation's control and the prohibition of fishermen from practicing their work. The current study highlights how famine amid the Israeli war has driven Gazans to eat the meat of globally endangered sea turtles.

Methodology

The current short descriptive study relied on collecting information and images related to the increased consumption of sea turtles by Gazans amid the Israeli war, by monitoring news websites and social media platforms to cover all aspects of this escalating local event. The Gaza Strip is an arid to semi-arid strip of Palestinian territory located in the southeastern Mediterranean Sea. It is 42km long and covers an area of 365km². Its current population exceeds 2.4 million, making the Gaza Strip one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been waging a brutal war on the Gaza Strip, described by international observers, legal experts, and political analysts as a war of genocide and ethnic cleansing. To date, the Israeli military has killed tens of thousands of Gazans, wounded more than 130,000, and repeatedly displaced nearly 90% of the population. Most of the population is suffering from a deliberate famine imposed by Israel during its painful war on the Gaza Strip, forcing Gazans to seek any type of food they can obtain, including marine animals; especially sea turtles.

Results

Ongoing famine and the search for food in the Gaza Strip amid the Israeli war

The current situation in the Gaza Strip, under the ongoing Israeli war since October 7, 2023, and the accompanying crippling blockade, has led to a dire humanitarian crisis, described by many in the international community as a deliberate famine. More than 90% of the population faces severe food insecurity, and the United Nations consistently warns of a rapidly worsening crisis. Due to

the current ongoing food shortage, large segments of the Gazan population are suffering from a catastrophic state of hunger, severe malnutrition, famine, disease, and death. Indeed, this crisis may be considered one of the worst hunger crises in the world. Faced with this dire situation, Gazans began searching for alternatives to wheat flour at the onset of the war. They ate animal and poultry feed, and ground into bread flour. In recent months, in a desperate attempt to find alternatives, some residents have begun grinding lentils, pasta, and leftover rice to make bread substitutes that are barely enough to satisfy hunger. With vegetables and fruits scarce, Gazans searched the remaining agricultural lands for herbs and grasses such as Least Mallow (*Malva parviflora*), Little Hogweed (*Portulaca oleracea*), Roman Nettle (*Urtica urens*), Dock (*Rumex pictus*), etc. As for fruits, the Gazans searched for some Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*), Sycamore Fig (*Ficus sycomorus*), Mulberry (*Morus alba*), Christ's Thorn - Jujube (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), and Prickly Pear or Indian Fig *Opuntia (Opuntia ficus-indica)* trees and shrubs for their delicious fruits.

With the scarcity of white and red meat to obtain the animal protein important for building bodies, tissues and cells, some Gazans began hunting wild mammals for food purposes such as Cape Hares (*Lepus capensis*), Long-eared Hedgehogs (*Hemiechinus auritus*) and Ethiopian Hedgehogs (*Paraechinus aethiopicus*), and birds such as Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*), Laughing Doves (*Spilopelia senegalensis*), Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia turtur*), Common Quails (*Coturnix coturnix*), Chukars (*Alectoris chukar*), Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Indian Mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*), House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), etc. Some media outlets reported that a small number of Gazans also slaughter their local horses (*Equus caballus*) for meat. As the blockade and famine intensified, some fishermen turned to the coastal waters of the Mediterranean—despite Israel's closure of the sea—to catch as many bony and cartilaginous fish, including endangered sharks as possible, which were insufficient to satisfy their hunger. As a last resort, they were forced to cook and consume the meat of endangered sea turtles and dolphins.

Gazans turn to Sea Turtle meat amid the famine

With food scarce in the besieged, war-torn Gaza Strip, some desperate fishermen and families have resorted to eating the meat of endangered sea turtles as a rare source of animal protein (Figure 1). Numerous videos and interviews have shown that after the sea turtle is slaughtered and its shell removed, the meat is cut, boiled, and cooked in a mixture of onions, peppers, tomatoes, and spices, ready to eat. Many of those lucky enough to find sea turtle meat were tasting it for the first time in their lives, never imagining they would have to eat sea turtles just to survive. They often say, "We never expected to eat a turtle". Some Gazan fishermen have publicly stated that, before the war and famine that ravaged the Gaza Strip, they regularly rescued sea turtles entangled in their nets and returned them to their natural habitats, and that they were always proud to protect these peaceful creatures, considered globally threatened. Today, in the midst of a catastrophic famine, we find ourselves powerless to protect them, and all we care about is feeding our children, who have become accustomed to sleeping hungry most

nights. Although some fishermen succeeded in catching sea turtles and cooking their meat in a desperate attempt to feed themselves and their families (Figure 1), others chose to sell the meat in local markets, where the price per kilogram exceeded US\$30 or more – a high price that reflects the severe scarcity of food. From a health

perspective, although some fishermen and Gazans have consumed sea turtle meat, no cases of illness or poisoning have been recorded as a result. Even with mild symptoms, no hospitalizations have been recorded.

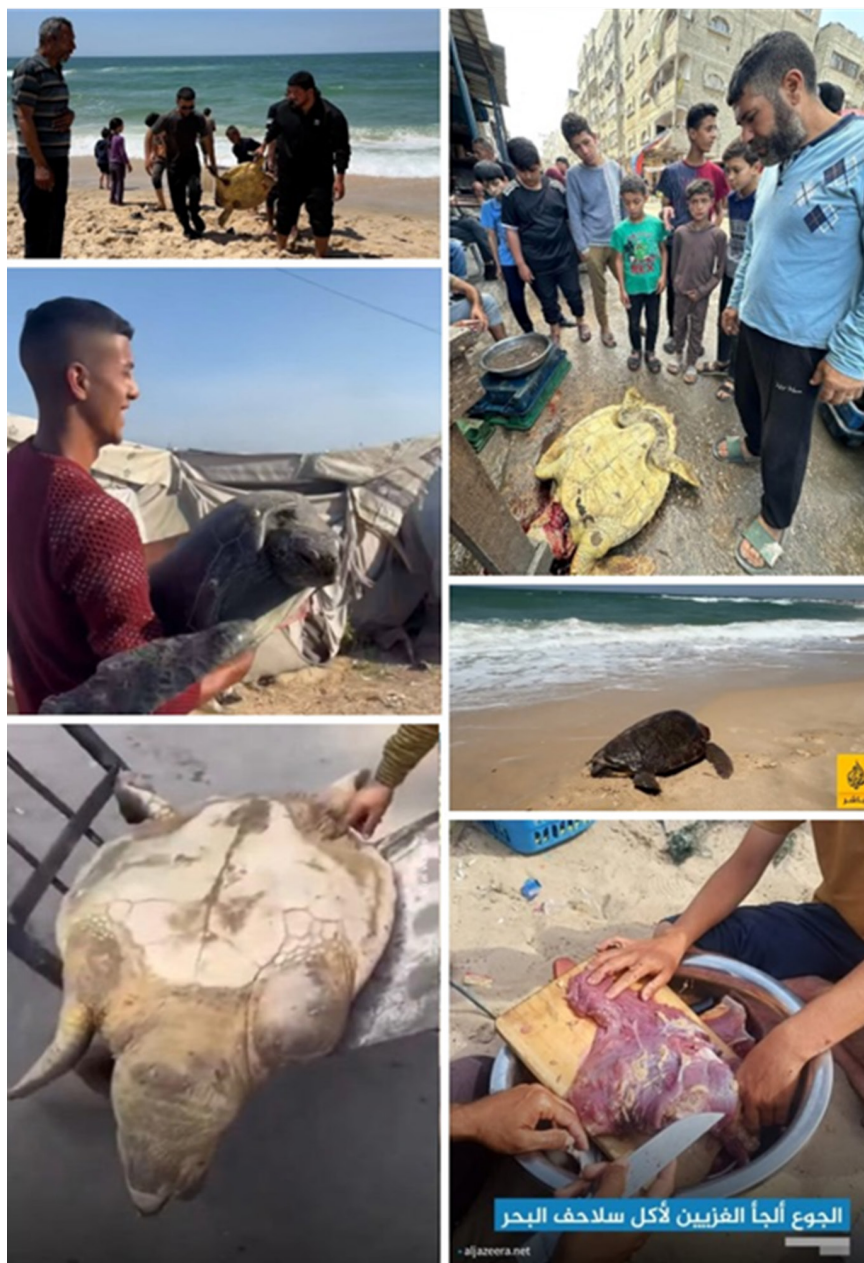


Figure 1: Hunting, selling, and harvesting sea turtle meat in the Gaza Strip, which is suffering from unimaginable famine amid the Israeli war.

Sea Turtle species caught or purchased for their meat

Based on observations in local markets or videos and photos posted on local and international media and social media platforms, it appears that two species of sea turtles, the most common in the marine ecosystem in the Gaza Strip, were slaughtered and eaten. The two species are the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta* Linnaeus, 1758) and the Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas* Linnaeus,

1758) (Figure 2). The former is the most common in the Gaza Strip's marine waters and is most commonly caught or by-caught in fishing nets, while the latter is less common and less frequently caught or by-caught. However, no one knows what the future holds for the number of sea turtle species that may be exploited locally for food. The Mediterranean is home to other species mentioned above, and some may visit Gaza's marine waters in the future.



Figure 2: The author presents two species of sea turtles recently hunted for their meat during the famine in the Gaza Strip: (A) Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), and (B) Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*).

Media and social media coverage of Gazans eating Sea Turtles amid famine

Local, Israeli, and international media outlets have been competing to cover the issue of Gazans eating globally endangered sea turtles amid war, blockade, famine, and protein deficiency. In fact, reports of Gazans eating endangered sea turtles have spread like wildfire across news sites and social media. A search of dozens, if not hundreds, of online news sites and social media platforms revealed the following headlines detailing the disaster:

- a) Famine and blockade drive Gazans to eat sea turtle meat.
- b) Palestinians turn to turtle meat as Israel continues to block aid in Gaza.
- c) Palestinians resort to eating turtles as food runs out in Gaza.
- d) Desperate Gazan families resort to turtle meat in hunt for food.
- e) Two months of 'Israel's' food blockade: Gaza spirals into famine, turning to horses, turtles for survival.
- f) Gazans post videos of themselves eating horse, turtle meat.
- g) Desperate Gazans eat sea turtles amid extreme food shortage.
- h) Gaza devastated by war: Due to hunger, Palestinians eat turtle meat.
- i) Gazans are forced to eat sea turtles to survive, saying there is no meat in the markets due to the famine.
- j) Gaza genocide: Palestinians resort to eating turtle meat due to Israeli blockade.

- k) Amid Israel-Hamas war, Gazans resort to turtle meat in hunt for food.

- l) People in Gaza resort to eating endangered sea turtle meat amid threat of famine.

Discussion

The Gaza Strip, which covers an area of 365km² and is home to approximately 2.4 million people, is facing a severe food crisis [21], with a high risk of famine and widespread malnutrition due to the ongoing Israeli war since October 7, 2023 and the restrictions on aid. The situation has deteriorated significantly since the ban on all humanitarian aid and commercial supplies entering the Gaza Strip, leaving the entire population severely food insecure, as several recent studies have shown [22-25]. All these miserable conditions have turned Gazans into starving people, suffering from diseases, epidemics, anemia, and immune deficiency disorders. Many news reports have indicated that deaths occurred as a result of the famine prevailing in the Gaza Strip [26]. The most vulnerable groups in Gaza's society are those with chronic diseases, pregnant women, newborns, and children as stated by Allabadi et al. [27], Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights [28] and the United Nations Population Fund – UNFPA [29]. In fact, malnutrition particularly affected pregnant women, newborns, and children, and was exacerbated by a lack of healthy food and nutritional supplements, poor hygiene conditions, and limited access to clean and safe drinking water. In light of this, the Gazans found few food opportunities other than searching everywhere for any type of plant or animal food to satisfy their hunger and the hunger of their children and provide food that would enable women to breastfeed their newborns. With the agricultural desertification that has become evident in the Gaza Strip

due to the ongoing Israeli war, and with the entry of humanitarian aid and commercial goods blocked due to the Israeli closure of the crossings, some Gazans have found their way to the sea—despite its military closure by Israel—to catch whatever marine life they can, hoping to obtain safe food that will at least slightly alleviate the famine they are facing.

Gazans' consumption of large, threatened marine megafauna has increased significantly in light of the Israeli war that erupted after October 7, 2023, and the accompanying comprehensive blockade, closure of crossings, and denial of humanitarian aid, in addition to the stifling famine that has ravaged Gazans, causing illness and death. Those marine megafauna included cartilaginous fish, particularly sharks; the Ocean Sunfish or Common Mola (*Mola mola* Linnaeus, 1758), dolphins; and various species of sea turtles. In fact, there is no dispute about the consumption of cartilaginous fish of all kinds by the Gazans, including Giant Devil Ray or Devil Fish (*Mobula mobular* Bonnaterre, 1788) and giant sharks, as they are a staple food in the Gaza Strip [11]. The Ocean Sunfish, the largest and heaviest bony fish in the world, is known to be inedible for humans in most countries of the world and for Gazans as well [30]. On June 1, 2025, a short video circulated on social media showing fishermen cutting up the flesh of an Ocean Sunfish on a Gaza City beach for eating. One fisherman said the huge fish was a gift from God ahead of Eid al-Adha, which falls in June 6, 2025. This very rare event came in light of the severe famine that the Gazans are experiencing due to the Israeli war. Not content with that, in nearly mid January 2025, a fisherman in the Khan Yunis

Governorate in the southern Gaza Strip caught a Striped Dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba* Meyen, 1833), took it home, and distributed its meat to poor Gazan families for consumption. Naturally, the news of this dolphin spread like wildfire across various media outlets and social media platforms [31,32].

While the consumption of Ocean Sunfish and Striped Dolphins was very rare during the current war and was recorded only once for each, the consumption of sea turtle meat was not very common before the war [14-16], but this consumption increased in light of the war, the blockade and the famine imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip (Figure 3). According to personal information, photos, and videos posted on media and social media platforms, consumption of sea turtle meat was limited to Loggerhead and Green Sea Turtles. The third species, the Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea* Vandelli, 1761), which is rarely found in the marine waters of the Gaza Strip, was not reported to be consumed amid the famine, and no evidence of its consumption was found. Abd Rabou [16] reported that the only known case of consumption of this species occurred in 2008, and involved a large specimen. In fact, as previously mentioned, consuming sea turtles of all species was not a common practice in the Gaza Strip before the war, given the availability of alternatives. On the contrary, some fishermen often rescued sea turtles caught in their nets and returned them to the sea, recognizing their ecological importance, especially since they are globally threatened and must be protected as pointed out by Abd Rabou [14,15].



Figure 3: An image processed using artificial intelligence shows Gaza families relying on sea turtle meat for their food

The Gaza Strip is perhaps the least hunted area for sea turtles in the world, even amidst the ongoing war. Yet these creatures are hunted, traded and eaten in numerous seas throughout the developed and developing world, and their eggs are collected from

their nests for a variety of purposes although national regulations in some countries prohibit their consumption [33-40]. In Egypt, the country closest to the Gaza Strip, there has been a market trade in a variety of sea turtle species for human consumption, a trade of

great concern as evidenced by numerous studies [41-46]. Although no cases of poisoning or injury from consuming sea turtle meat have been recorded in the Gaza Strip, there is growing evidence that consuming sea turtles may be harmful to human health due to biotoxins, environmental contaminants, viruses, parasites, bacteria, etc., sometimes leading to hospitalization and death [35]. Heavy metals pose a health risk to humans who eat sea turtle meat [47,48]. According to Aguirre et al. [49], levels of heavy metals and organochlorine compounds measured in edible sea turtle tissue exceed international food safety standards and may lead to toxic effects, including neurotoxicity, kidney disease, liver cancer, and effects on fetal and child development. Mbaé et al. [50] reported an outbreak of food poisoning and death following the consumption of Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) meat in the rural area of Ndrondroni, Mohéli Island, Comoros. The results indicated that a bio-toxin ingested by the turtle may have been the source of the poisoning. Perhaps the most recent example of poisoning from eating sea turtle meat occurred in March 2024 in Tanzania, where 9 people died and 78 others were hospitalized. They were susceptible to chelonitoxism poisoning, a condition caused by eating sea turtle meat contaminated with chelonitoxins, which are believed to accumulate from the environment without affecting the turtle [51]. In general, eating sea turtles is considered harmful for several reasons: It can lead to food poisoning (chelonitoxism), exposure to heavy metals and contaminants, and can endanger the species.

Like any rare, unusual, or resonant event, many local, Israeli, and international media outlets, as well as local social media platforms, have covered the Gazans' consumption of sea turtle meat and other threatened marine animals in some detail amid the ongoing war, blockade, and famine. Most headlines and social media posts focused on the fact that famine and the Israeli-imposed blockade on the Gaza Strip have forced desperate Gazans to eat the meat of endangered sea turtles to survive. In fact, rare and serious incidents occurring in both the Gaza Strip and Israel under the current circumstances of war and famine usually receive extensive media coverage in the media and on social media platforms. For example, various media outlets detailed the incidents of a Desert Lynx (*Caracal caracal* Schreber, 1776) attack on five Israeli soldiers in the Negev Desert on March 18, 2025, and the fatal Dusky Shark (*Carcharhinus obscurus* Lesueur, 1818) attack on an Israeli diver off the coast of Hadera in the Mediterranean Sea on April 21, 2025 as pointed out by Abd Rabou et al. [52,53]. Regarding the previously mentioned Striped Dolphin that was caught and eaten in the southern Gaza Strip in January 2025, as a unique incident, Lukash & Halabi [54] published an article on Ynet news.com explaining that eating dolphins that have stranded on beaches is considered a health disaster. At the global and regional levels, unique incidents also receive media attention. As an example, media outlets around the world reported the deaths of nine people and the injury of 78 others in Tanzania as a result of eating sea turtle meat [55,56]. It is clear from previous rare incidents that when covered by the media, of any kind, it can highlight the risks and raise citizens' awareness

of the need to protect and conserve globally threatened species in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the midst of this brutal war, no one can speak to or advise Gazans against hunting or consuming wildlife, whether terrestrial or marine, regardless of their global or local standing in the field of biological or ecological conservation. The nutritional deprivation suffered by Gazans under the shadow of war, blockade, and famine is so severe that diseases and epidemics, including immunodeficiency, anemia, and the spread of parasites, bacterial, and viral diseases, have become a given. This situation is exacerbated by repeated displacement, overcrowding, water scarcity, the proliferation of solid waste and sewage, and environmental pollution that has reached unbearable levels unparalleled in the world. All Palestinian forums hope that the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip will end, that prosperity will prevail, and that Gazans will enjoy security and safety, including food security, which is crucial for all segments of Gazan society. This will enable them to care for their natural environment, including the sea turtles—the subject of this study—and to preserve and protect them sustainably.

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