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Photo: Natura 2000, Cabo Verde

Cabo Verdean NGO Natura 2000's monitors with a sporadic nester, an olive ridley, on Calheta Beach, Boa Vista Island.

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What Darwin Didn't Say About the Turtles of Maio

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For decades, island biodiversity conservation has been fertile ground for manuals of good intentions: foreign conservationists, rushed diagnoses, and programs designed thousands of miles from the sand (Campbell 2007; Holmes 2011). Yet on the island of Maio, Cabo Verde, facing the very waters once sailed by a young Charles Darwin aboard the Beagle, something else is unfolding. A shift not in species, but in authorship. What truly matters is who asks the questions, who frames the problems, and who leads the responses, something Darwin, with any luck, never saw coming. For over a decade now, the marine turtle conservation program on the island of Maio, Cabo Verde, has been in Caboverdean hands. Leno Passos (2015 to 2019), Jairson Veiga (2020 to 2022), and Herval Silva (2023 to present) have not been mere implementers. They have led the work, transformed its scope, and most importantly, grounded field operations in the island's own social and ecological realities. Each nesting season, around one hundred residents are employed across Maio's thirteen zones, and hundreds more, including children, youth and adults, participate voluntarily to understand the meaning and value of protecting their natural heritage. This is not a foreign intervention. It is a locally organized, effective, and deeply committed community network.

Interestingly, the growing involvement of Maio's inhabitants has coincided with a clear upward trend in the number of loggerhead turtle nests recorded annually on the island (Fig. 1). The 2021 season stands out as a record-breaking peak, the highest ever documented. While the rise in nest counts cannot be attributed to human participation, the timing is fortunate. As the nesting numbers increase, so too does the need for expanded monitoring, deeper scientific inquiry, and broader ecological understanding. What is shown in Figure 1 is not just a series of annual nest counts. It is also a reflection of the logistical and intellectual commitment required to follow a species whose rhythms are as mysterious as they are vital.

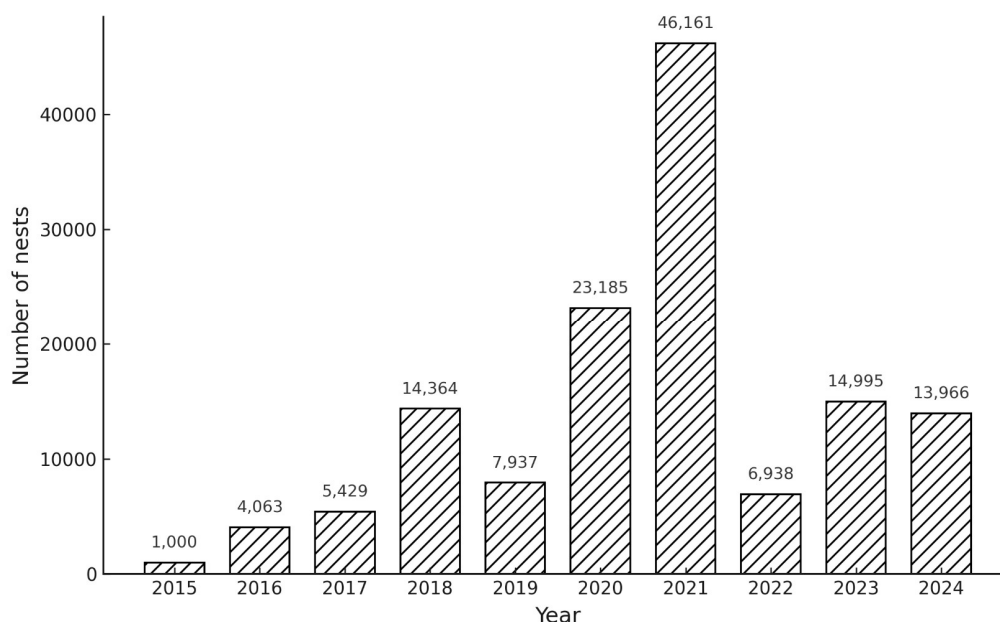


Figure 1. Annual counts of loggerhead turtle nests recorded on Maio Island, Cabo Verde (2015–2024), generated through a community-based monitoring program exemplifying locally led conservation.

If conservation has taken a local turn, science has found its new accent as well. What began as external technical support gradually evolved into a process of scientific training and appropriation led from within Cabo Verde. The story of Jairson Veiga illustrates this shift with striking clarity. We first met him as a student volunteer. Today, with a completed undergraduate and Master's degree and now preparing for a PhD, he leads conservation research and mentors students in his own homeland. A local scientist in the making, rooted in local territory, addressing local questions with global tools.

This same resilience — evolutionary and institutional — marks the recent, rapid shifts in sea turtle protection. On islands like Maio, where the Maio Biodiversity Foundation (FMB) was once directed entirely from abroad, leadership has begun to shed its old skin. Today, the Foundation is led by local hands—including in its direction—and supported by a new generation of leaders, many of them women, who bring fresh perspectives and a deep connection to the island's rhythms and realities. Across its programs, from turtle monitoring, environmental education, and protected area oversight, to communication, volunteer coordination, and the sustainable development of local livelihoods, the Foundation's work is today designed, implemented, and evaluated by Caboverdeans.

This process, far from anecdotal, calls for a reconsideration of the hegemonic conservation model that has long prevailed in peripheral regions, often distant from global centers of power and decision-making. It is no longer a matter of implementing imported solutions, but of weaving knowledge networks that are grounded in the local, for the local, and expressed in a distinct and autonomous voice (Routledge *et al.* 2012). It is an exercise in epistemic sovereignty, understood as the ability of a community to define, produce, and validate its own knowledge (Connell 2014; Emard *et al.* 2024). But and this "but" matters, decolonization in this context does not imply isolation. The Foundation has successfully built a network of international collaborations aimed at strengthening local capacity rather than simply replacing it. These partnerships have played a critical role in securing funding, providing specialized scientific advice, and co-coordinating initiatives such as the Foundation's Marine Program, currently co-led by a Caboverdean, as well as contributing key expertise that helps anticipate challenges and avoid common pitfalls in similar processes. In areas where growth is still needed, such as scientific and public communication, these collaborations provide valuable opportunities to enhance local capacity without undermining local leadership. This approach reflects broader trends in the literature on decolonizing conservation and equitable international partnerships (Yanou *et al.* 2023).

And Darwin? Perhaps he did not forget as much as we thought. After all, he once walked these very islands. But it is hard to imagine he foresaw that, a century and a half later, the most compelling evolution would not be happening on the beaches where turtles nest, but in the ways human communities organize themselves to understand and protect them, by posing their own questions, framing their own priorities, and leading the way forward. Perhaps that is our most urgent evolutionary leap: not of genes, but of authority.

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