

NOMINATION APPLICATION FORM

Dr Ronel Nel

Section 1: Applicant Details

Name: Dr Ronel Nel

Date: 4 March 2025

Email address: Petronella.Nel@shams.gov.sa

Nominated position: President

Professional affiliations: Executive Director – Sea Turtle Conservation, SHAMS; Research Associate Nelson Mandela University

Country of residence: Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Geographic area of work: Western and Northwestern Indian Ocean

Section 2: Applicant Response

How would you describe your work with sea turtles?

I have a diverse background in sea turtle conservation. My career began in a conservation management agency in 2002, followed by 19 years in academia, where I trained undergraduate and postgraduate students in various aspects of sea turtle ecology, population dynamics, and coastal zone management. Simultaneously, I have served as an advisor to governments in the Indian Ocean region on sea turtle conservation and management. I started my career working on a sea turtle program with 40 years of continuous data collection and have contributed to extending it to 60 years of ongoing monitoring and management. Currently, I am in the Red Sea, where there is no established history of coherent sea turtle conservation and management.

How many years have you worked with sea turtles?

Since 2002, I have worked full time as a conservation manager, academic, researcher, and government advisor.

Which Annual Sea Turtle Symposia, or Annual Workshops have you attended?

Crete, Brisbane, San Diego, South Carolina. The sea turtle symposia are always around March which coincided with my heavy teaching load. It was only able to attend if it overlapped with a university break.

Have you been involved with any Symposium activities?

Nope—I was nominated once before, but another representative was chosen then. I have always supported the ISTS and its mandate. Still, the conservation load with the work of the IUCN MTSG, IOSEA, and regional turtle task forces in the region afforded more than enough international participation to connect to the rest of the turtle community.

What would you like the Nominating Committee, Board of Directors, and membership to know about you as a candidate for your nominated position?

My motivation is simple—I am not in this for fame, fortune, or popularity. I am well aware of many, though not all, of the complexities, challenges, and traditions of the ISTS. My goal is to represent a region that remains largely underrepresented in international committees and ISTS leadership—the Western and Northwestern Indian Ocean (WIO & NWIO). There is a noticeable bias toward representation from the Americas and Europe, while regions such as Southern and East Africa and the Middle East have not been strongly featured. I understand that this is partly due to historical factors, but I see a small window of opportunity to change this by leveraging the goodwill, resources, and growing interest in Saudi Arabia.

In what ways would you like to contribute to the Symposium/the International Sea Turtle Society?

The Team and I in Saudi Arabia have the expertise and political support from national and local leadership to host a unique conference. I also understand that the president intends to commit five years to the leadership of ISTS. I will certainly be able to bring a unique perspective to this body from a region currently underrepresented.

How do you envision using the Symposium to advance sea turtle biology and promote conservation?

The most crucial advancement here is to propel a region with vast resources but a limited conservation history into 21st-century conservation. The Arabian Gulf and parts of the Red Sea face significant development pressures, compounded by climate change and other environmental challenges. Historically, environmental and political perspectives in the region have been insular, but this is shifting under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The Kingdom has a strong interest in engaging on the international stage, and hosting such an event could have far-reaching impacts beyond sea turtle conservation. This presents a unique opportunity to introduce conservation excellence and progressive environmental thinking to a region that is not only ready to learn but also eager to lead.

Why is the ISTS as an organization important to you, professionally and personally?

The ISTS is a prestigious organization with excellent leadership. The individuals who have served and are currently serving are highly competent, and I am deeply grateful for their

contributions. However, from a professional perspective, this is an opportunity to be the right person, at the right time, in the right place. Saudi Arabia is presenting a unique conservation opportunity. On a personal level, as a Western female, I am proud to serve as a local example of women in leadership positions. This also presents a chance to create opportunities for the region and beyond. This region is often misunderstood, and there are significant benefits in networking and collaborating with it.

What is your vision for the ISTS over the next 5 to 10 years?

I would like ISTS to be more than “a symposium body.” It has the platform and expertise to strengthen its role in conservation. Within the organization, there is space to explore the “Birdlife” model, where it can draw on its membership to participate in management fora. It may take some reorganisation, and there may be a unique opportunity to do so.

Please include a 250-word bio Ok Photo:

Dr. Ronel Nel is the Executive Director of Sea Turtle Conservation at SHAMS, a recently established government agency in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Previously, she was a Professor of Marine Biology at the University of Washington, USA, and Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. Ronel earned a PhD in sandy beach ecology from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, when she transitioned to gain hands-on conservation experience as the Regional Marine Ecologist at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife continuing a four-decade long conservation and monitoring program on loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles.

Her years in the field reinforced the need for evidence-based conservation, ultimately drawing her back to academia, where she mentored a generation of scientists while conducting groundbreaking research in coastal ecology, sea turtle biology, biogeography, and population dynamics. Alongside a dedicated team of students, she advanced both fundamental and applied marine research, earning recognition for excellence in teaching, research, and outreach. In 2018, she was awarded the prestigious Pew Marine Fellowship to expand conservation research into population dynamics and species recovery of Western Indian Ocean leatherback sea turtles.

Ronel’s expertise spans the full spectrum of marine conservation—from fundamental science to real-world application—coupled with extensive experience in public engagement and policy advisory roles at local, national, and international levels. Her ability to bridge scientific research with actionable conservation strategies made her the ideal leader to spearhead sea turtle conservation efforts in the Red Sea. Under her leadership, SHAMS is poised to drive meaningful, science-based conservation initiatives that will leave a lasting impact on sea turtles and their habitats in the region.



Section 3: Declaration

Circle your response to the below statements:

- I am a current member of ISTS: **Yes**
- I have read and understand the ISTS by-laws and constitution. **Yes**
- I have read and understand the terms of reference for the position which I am nominating for: **Yes**
- For Board of Directors nominees, I understand that the Annual Board Retreat is usually in the 3rd week of August. **Yes**

Please read the following statement and add your initials below to confirm you understand the workload involved:

The Board is a working Board. All members are expected to carry the workload, share the responsibility of assigned tasks, and respond to written communications—this can typically

be 40+ hours per year in addition to the Board meetings at the Symposium and the Board Retreat. If Board members do not actively participate, they will be asked to resign.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Alk' or similar, located to the right of the main text block.