

POACHING THREATENS THE GREEN TURTLE ROOKERY AT TORTUGUERO, COSTA RICA

The 22-mile (35 km) beach of Tortuguero, Costa Rica, hosts the largest green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) rookery in the Western Hemisphere. Tortuguero is also the site of the longest running sea turtle monitoring program in history, having begun in 1955 (Carr et al., 1978). The 1997 Green Turtle Program, organized by the Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC), extended from 1 July to 20 September. In total, 2,111 green turtles, eight hawksbills (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and five leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*) were tagged during the course of the 1997 program.

In addition to the field research, several environmental awareness and education activities were conducted as part of the 1997 Green Turtle Program. These included a recycling program for the local community, the administration of a Visitors Center for tourists, information transfer and cooperation with local tour guides, and a program to involve the Tortuguero School in sea turtle and environmental conservation projects. The response from the local community to these activities has so far been very positive.

All is not well, however, for the sea turtles at Tortuguero. During weekly track (nesting) surveys along 18 miles (29 km) of beach, evidence of widespread poaching was found. We estimate that at least 1,500-2,000 green turtles from this population were illegally taken from the nesting beach in 1997. Poachers flip the turtles over under the cover of darkness as they crawl onto the beach to nest. The turtles are placed in waiting boats and transported to Limon where they are butchered with turtles legally harvested (see Opay, this issue). Poachers prefer to seize the turtles as soon as they crawl out of the water. This conveys a dual advantage. First, the effort to haul them into waiting boats is reduced; second, the short track is soon erased by tidal action and thus the emergence may pass unrecorded by biologists. For this reason, our estimate of mortality due to poaching should be considered conservative.

Tortuguero is a national park; the taking of green turtles from the nesting beach is prohibited. However, the Tortuguero National Park Service (ACTo) lacks the human resources and necessary equipment to enforce the protective legislation. With an aim to reduce the serious problem of poaching, an agreement between CCC and ACTo was recently signed. According to the agreement, CCC will assist in the funding and organizing of additional guards which will patrol the beach during the nesting season.

The international importance of the Tortuguero rookery was acknowledged at the "Regional Workshop in Marine Turtle Conservation in Central America", which took place in Tortuguero from 26 September - 1 October 1997 (see Chacòn, this issue). Tortuguero was identified as the most important nesting beach in Costa Rica and poaching was identified as the most serious threat to green turtles in Costa Rica. The participants of the workshop (representing all seven Central American nations) signed a Resolution condemning the poaching of sea turtles from the nesting beach and urged the Government of Costa Rica to take swift action to resolve the problem.

Carr, A., M. H. Carr and A. B. Meylan. 1978. The Ecology and Migrations of Sea Turtles, 7. The West Caribbean Green Turtle Colony. Bull. Amer. Mus. Natur. Hist. 162(2):1-46.

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