

VELADOR

Science-Based Sea Turtle Conservation Since 1959

Issue 3, 2025

Help us Raise Funds for STC's Panama Program this Giving Tuesday



A leatherback turtle returns to the Caribbean Sea after nesting on Soropta Beach, Panama. Photo credit: Daniel Bolon.

Thousands of endangered leatherback hatchlings are killed each year in Panama by illegal egg harvesters. Sea Turtle Conservancy's Panama Turtle Project is on the front lines saving as many turtles as possible, and we will save even more next year with your help.

Giving Tuesday, which occurs the Tuesday after Thanksgiving (December 2 this year), is one day when everyone can join together to make a huge difference! Your gift will translate directly into sea turtles being saved on the beach in Panama.

Last year, STC supporters raised \$52,000 on Giving Tuesday for our work to reduce the impacts of beachfront lighting in Florida. STC has set its sights even higher this year, with a goal of raising \$66,000 for our conservation program in Panama. STC's Board of Directors has pledged to match up to \$33,000 for every dollar donated.

For a long time after monitoring of nests began at Soropta Beach, Panama (2002), the highest number of leatherback nests recorded was

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792, which occurred in 2019. That record stood until 2021, when STC documented 1,484 leatherback nests—nearly twice the previous record. This year was another good year in Soroapta with 1,272 nests—the second highest number we’ve seen in a single season on this beach. Unfortunately, nesting at another of our leatherback project sites, Chiriqui Beach, has been in decline. In 2025 there were 1,686 nests, down from 2,539 in 2024.

Overall, both leatherback and hawksbill nesting numbers in Panama have been encouraging—showing that STC’s sustained efforts are working. Leatherbacks take a minimum of 20 years to reach reproductive maturity, and it’s likely not a coincidence that conservation efforts at Soroapta Beach began 20 years ago. The increase in nesting may be evidence that the first generation of hatchlings born at Soroapta after the launch of conservation efforts on this beach are finally reaching adulthood and returning to nest.



Panama law enforcement personnel and park rangers visit STC’s station at Soroapta Beach to learn about sea turtles and the threats they face on this remote beach.

While STC celebrates increases in turtle nesting in Panama, we are alarmed about increases in the rate of illegal egg harvesting. Even with the presence of STC nest surveyors patrolling Soroapta Beach, clandestine egg hunters are on the beach every night of the nesting season, taking every nest they can find. A lack of law enforcement presence on this remote beach, combined with the economic hardships of a two-year-long pandemic, exacerbated a problem that has been simmering for years.

STC is working hard to curtail this illegal activity so our years of conservation work are not undone. We constructed two hatcheries next to our station where we are relocating and protecting as many nests as possible. STC views hatcheries as an option of last resort; unfortunately, we have reached that point at Soroapta. The hatchery will be used only long enough to see the threat of poaching reduced to a manageable level.

Park guards informed STC that they could not conduct night patrols to help prevent illegal egg harvesting because they didn’t have a place

VELADOR {bel.a.dor}

In Caribbean cultures, **Velador** translates as “one who stands vigil” —referring to turtle hunters who waited at night for turtles to come ashore. STC claims this title for its newsletter, and around the world STC’s researchers and volunteers are replacing poachers as the new veladors. The **Velador** is published for Members and supporters of the nonprofit **Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC)**. STC is dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles through research, advocacy, education and protection of the habitats upon which they depend.

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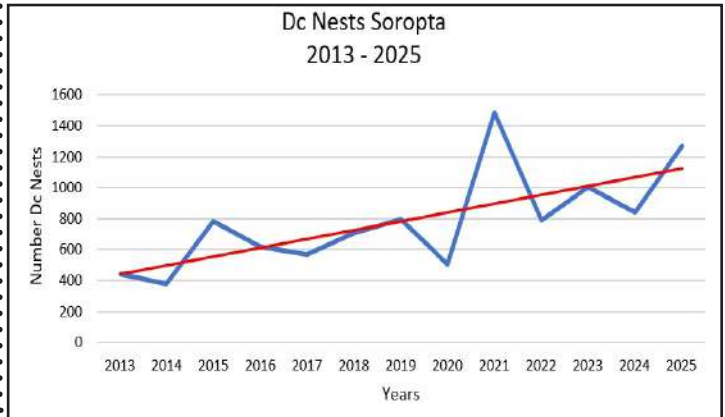
to sleep on this remote beach. With help from STC's donors, we constructed a four-person bunk house adjacent to our hatchery for visiting law enforcement officials—providing them a base of operations for increased nighttime beach patrols. STC also provides meals to all visiting park guards, so we can help them maintain a visible presence on the beach. In order to continue providing this assistance, while also continuing our own nest relocation and hatchery operation, we need our supporters to step up this Giving Tuesday.

We are hopeful STC's members will support the program this Giving Tuesday, when all donations up to \$33K will be matched 1:1 by the STC Board of Directors. With your support, STC will continue monitoring Panama's nesting beaches to make them safe for sea turtles.

Help support STC's Giving Tuesday Fundraiser by

donating:

1. Online at conserveturtles.org/givingtuesday
2. Calling the STC office at 352-373-6441 with your credit card info
3. Mailing a check with "Giving Tuesday" in the subject line. All checks received with "Giving Tuesday" will count towards the campaign if received by December 31. 🐢



Advocacy Update

STC hosts International Visitor Leadership Program

On October 8, Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) had the unique opportunity to host 12 international delegates – all who work in the research and management of plastic pollution – at our main office in Gainesville, Florida.

The visit was part of the U.S. Department of State International Visitor Leadership Program, which has been in operation since 1940. The program allows for professional exchange and relationship building between American community leaders and international experts in government, business, academia, and other fields. The delegates who traveled to Florida were from Austria, Brazil, Colombia, Germany, India, Italy, Jamaica, Malaysia, Peru, Senegal, and Tunisia.

STC Executive Director David Godfrey provided an overview of STC's history and major research, education, and conservation activities. Afterward, STC Development and Policy Coordinator Stacey Gallagher discussed STC's plastic reduction initiatives, including our efforts to partner with

restaurants to reduce their single-use plastic consumption, beach clean-up events in Florida and our Caribbean study sites, our state-level policy initiatives. Stacey also described STC's efforts to reduce light pollution on Florida's beaches. The visit allowed for STC to learn about plastic waste reduction activities occurring outside the U.S. and provided the opportunity for us to share effective strategies to protect marine turtles and their environments to international experts.

We are thankful to GlobalJax, the Northeast Florida organization that coordinated this visit, as well as the delegates, for allowing STC to share our plastic reduction efforts. 🐢



By Stacey Gallagher
Policy Coordinator

STC Launches Exciting New Project in The Bahama's Exuma Islands

In 2025, the Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) had the opportunity to begin the Exuma Turtle Project, dedicated to advancing our knowledge of sea turtle conservation and health across key habitats in the Bahamas. This research offers the unique opportunity to gather in-water data on sea turtles residing in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park (ECLSP), a pristine marine habitat that has been carefully protected for decades. The data collected will be used to assist Bahamian wildlife managers in assessing the current status of juvenile and adult sea turtles in the ECLSP, support the development of informed and science-based policy decisions, and to compare against similar data collected by STC in Florida and Bermuda.



Release of a juvenile green turtle. (September 2025). Photo by Evan Cooper.

In this initial year, STC conducted two sampling trips, one in May and another in September, capturing a total of 58 sea turtles (55 greens and 3 hawksbills). One of the hawksbills was an adult female, while the rest of the turtles were juveniles. STC scientists flipper tagged the turtles, measured them, and collected tissue samples to identify their genetic beach of origin and sex. Our research team also analyzed the blood of 39 turtles and collected lavage samples from 20 turtles to learn about the health and diet of ECLSP sea turtles. The green turtles were safely hand captured in shallow water bays and the hawksbills were hand captured on

deeper reefs, using scuba. The majority of turtles were found to be in good condition and all were released at the same location they were captured.

During the second field trip, 10 green turtles were recaptured that had been previously captured earlier in the year, resulting in a 30% recapture rate. Concerningly, one of the recaptured turtles had a possible spear wound in its carapace, which it did not have when first captured. Recapture data like this allows STC to track individuals over time, revealing key information on their growth, health, and overall well-being in the ECLSP, providing important insights helpful to secure long-term protection of these turtles and their habitats. During both visits, STC hosted Bahamas National Trust (BNT) park staff, allowing them to observe STC's work and engage in discussions about future collaborations, highlighting the shared commitment to safeguarding these remarkable marine species and habitats.

In addition to the 58 turtles captured, the STC research team sighted another 138 juvenile green turtles and two loggerheads (one female and one male) within the park boundaries. The location of these turtles was saved and mapped for park staff and future research. We are happy to report that none of the sea turtles STC's team saw or captured



Dr. Dan Evans measuring the carapace width of a juvenile green turtle (May 2025). Photo by Evan Cooper.

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had fibropapillomatosis, a common disease of green turtles in tropical and subtropical regions. This may indicate a healthy environment preventing the disease from triggering, a lack of pathogens, or a combination of these factors.

Overall, 2025 marked a highly productive and promising start to the Exuma Turtle Project, demonstrating strong potential for long-term studies on turtle growth, health, and movements. STC is enthusiastic about continuing this work and gaining insights on the sea turtles foraging in this understudied marine habitat. The information obtained from these turtles will give valuable insights into the genetics, sex ratios, and health status of the ECLSP sea turtle aggregation, all of which will assist Bahamas scientists and wildlife managers in their efforts to protect sea turtles and their marine habitats. 🐢

To learn more about STC's work in The Bahamas, visit conserveturtles.org/project/exuma-turtle-project/

By David Godfrey, Rick Herren, Dan Evans, Evan Cooper, Costanza Manes & Margaret Lilyestrom



Release of an adult female hawksbill turtle in September. Photo by Evan Cooper.

Tour de Turtles

The 18th Annual Tour de Turtles marathon officially ended on November 1. So how did our 22 competitors fare? Read on to find out!

Hardshells:

- 1st – Miso Speedy
- 2nd – Clarissa
- Cobblecrumb
- 3rd – Seartina
- 4th – Esmeralda
- 5th – Rush
- 6th – Wassaw Will
- 7th – Moana
- 8th – Ariel
- 9th – Nugget
- 10th – Winnie
- 11th – Billy
- 12th – Haven

Leatherbacks:

- 1st – Crush
- 2nd – Riptide
- 3rd – Cuperina III
- 4th – Turt Reynolds
- 5th – Pebbles
- 6th – Honu
- 7th – Buddy
- 8th – Seayoncé
- 9th – Sol
- 10th – Tingum

Although not our fastest or farthest swimming turtle, loggerhead Winnie from Anna Maria Island, FL won over the fans and took home the People's Choice Award to her team at Hurricane Hanks.

Even though the official Tour de Turtles race has ended, you can continue to follow the turtles with our free STC Turtle Tracker App or on our website at: conserveturtles.org/sea-turtle-tracking

A big thank you to our turtle sponsors for helping make this event possible: Fahlo, Disney's Conservation Fund, Disney Cruise Line, Four Seasons Resort Nevis, Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch, Hurricane Hanks, Sea Life Trust, Atlantis, Turtle, The Turtle Hospital, Shark Reef, Certina, Gimme Seaweed, Gideon's

Bakehouse, Ripley's Aquariums, NOGU, Buddies for Paws, CaribbeanSol, and Wow Wow Lemonade. 🐢

Holiday Gift Guide

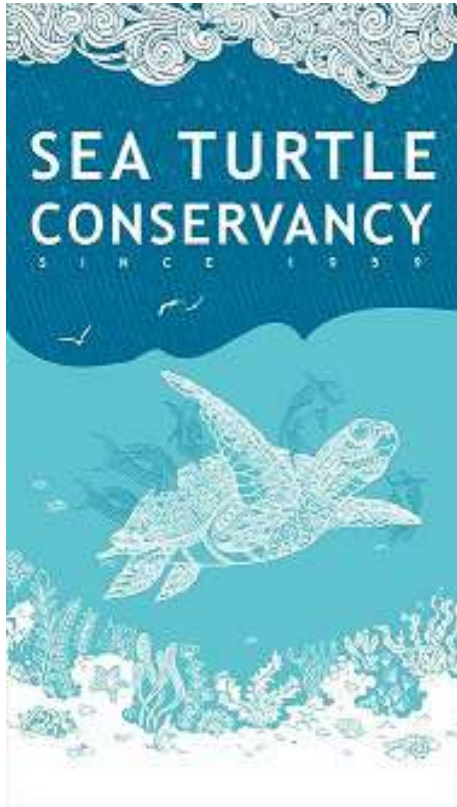
A.



B.



C.



D.



E.



F.



A. 2025 Holiday Ornament - Engraved with the year 2025 on the back. **\$9.95**

B. 2026 Sea Turtle Scenes Calendar - 11" x 17" (open) wall calendar features some of STC's favorite sea turtle scenes taken by talented photographers from around the world. **\$14.95**

C. STC Towel - Turkish towel produced exclusively for STC by Riviera Towel Company. Made from 100% Turkish Cotton. Measures 70 x 40. **\$34.95**

D. STC Turtle Logo Hat - Soft baseball cap with adjustable cloth strap. STC logo on front and Sea Turtle Conservancy on the back. **\$29.95**

E. Hatchling Notecards - Includes eight assorted cards and matching envelopes. **\$16.95**

F. Turtle Dog Toy - includes natural jute rope for easy gripping during tug-of-war, a built-in squeaker for added excitement, and crinkle fabric that dogs love. Measures 8 in. **\$21.95**

Visit [conserveturtles.org/shop](https://www.conserveturtles.org/shop) to shop for these items and other great turtle gear!

Cause-Related Partners

These companies give back to STC when you buy their products! View all the companies that STC partners with at www.conserveturtles.org/partners-sponsors.



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Give the gift of sea turtle survival this holiday season! Sea turtle adoptions make a great, green holiday gift idea for the people in your life that want to make a positive impact on our world. With your tax-deductible donation of \$56 or more, you are making a direct difference in the lives of sea turtles! Sea Turtle Conservancy will send gift recipients a special folder with a personalized adoption certificate, Sea Turtle Conservation Guide, window cling, sea turtle sticker, bookmark, hatchling magnet, one-year subscription to STC's newsletter, and a gift of your choice (turtle plushie, bracelet, ornament or calendar). Please order by **Dec. 15, 2025** for delivery by Christmas.



To adopt a turtle, visit conserveturtles.org/adopt-a-turtle