

DEVELOPMENT OF A SUSTAINABLE ECO-TOURISM SYSTEM AT BLUFF BEACH, BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE, PANAMA.

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Bluff Beach, located on Isla Colón, in Bocas del Toro Province, on the Caribbean coast of Panama, supports nesting populations of leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) sea turtles. Unfortunately, various anthropogenic threats have been identified in recent years, including the illegal take of nests and females, and degradation of the nesting habitat through sand extraction and inappropriate use of the beach during the filming of reality television programs. The local indigenous community acknowledged the potential negative impacts of such threats on these critically endangered species, and in 2010 established a grassroots conservation organization; the Bocas Hawksbill Association (Asociación Natural Bocas Carey - ANABOCA). Members of ANABOCA have been working with Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) staff to conduct a regular monitoring and conservation program along 4.8 km of beach since 2010; results indicate that 250 – 300 leatherback, and 100 – 150 hawksbill nests are laid each season. Due to its proximity to Bocas Town, and relative ease of access, Bluff Beach is subject to considerable tourist activity, especially tours to observe nesting turtles at night. To date, however, such tours have been conducted in an ad hoc and uncontrolled manner, with no formalized training of guides, no regulation of the number of tourists permitted on the beach, and no established regulations or best practices. These problems arise primarily from the fact that while designated as a Municipal Reserve, Bluff Beach is not included in the official list of protected areas of the National Environmental Authority (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente – ANAM); thus there is no law enforcement or protection, no restriction of access, and no control on the use of the natural resources in the Reserve. During 2012, under its contract with the USAID Regional Program for the Management of Aquatic Resources and Economic Alternatives, STC has collaborated with ANABOCA and other regional stakeholder groups to form an Advisory Group for Bluff Beach Municipal Reserve, with the goals of: a) establishing a turtle tourism program for the Reserve that ensures economic benefit for the local community while simultaneously minimizing the impacts of tourism on turtles and the nesting habitat; b) working with the municipality to encourage them to establish the Reserve as an ANAM protected area, and thus ensure its adequate protection; and c) establishing a management plan for the Reserve, which will ultimately subsume the turtle tourism administrative program and ensure its long-term viability. The Advisory Group has also assisted ANABOCA in obtaining legal incorporation and developing a business structure, and has provided scientifically-informed training for guides and beach monitors. Results from a series of meetings and workshops conducted throughout 2012 will be presented, to demonstrate the development of the Advisory Group and the steps taken to establish a sustainable turtle tourism program at Bluff Beach. Conclusions and recommendations will be provided, as will an analysis of some problems encountered to date, and the solutions devised to address them. There will also be a summary of the proposed next phase in this ongoing process.