

## **EXPLORING LOCAL COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF SEA TURTLE EGG CONSUMPTION IN TORTUGUERO, COSTA RICA**

**Carmen Mejías | Gilberto Borges | Raúl García | Jaime Restrepo | Roldán Valverde**  
Sea Turtle Conservancy

Tortuguero has the largest green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) rookery in the Western Atlantic Ocean. In addition, threatened hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) sea turtles nest on the same beach. Since 1955, when Archie Carr started studying the population of sea turtles in Tortuguero, long-term conservation efforts to protect these species have been implemented, with the creation of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation in 1959, currently known as Sea Turtle Conservancy. Furthermore, Tortuguero National Park was created in 1975 to strengthen the protection of the nesting beach and the adjacent habitats. The local community has also played a major role in these conservation efforts, shifting from a consumptive use of sea turtles, harvesting the turtles and their eggs, to a non-consumptive use, benefiting from ecotourism. At present, Tortuguero is globally recognized as an example of how marine turtles can be used to generate great revenue in a non-consumptive way. However, despite all the efforts to conserve sea turtle populations, poaching of nests and egg trade still occurs in the area, as shown by recent records. Effectively protecting sea turtle nests, not only requires vigilance and comprehensive protection efforts, but also a qualitative approach to understanding the dynamics of sea turtle egg consumption. Therefore, the aim of this ongoing study is to identify the perceptions and attitudes of the local community and other stakeholders towards the consumption of sea turtle eggs and its impact on sea turtle conservation. From September 2017 to December 2017, questionnaires are being distributed to the local community and semi-structured interviews are being conducted with key informants. Preliminary data suggest that sea turtle egg consumption still persists within the community of Tortuguero. Nevertheless, consumers are perceived to be between 30-50% of the population and consumption has shifted from being subsistence to occasional consumption, happening at least once a month. Among consumers there is some understanding of the issues surrounding sea turtle conservation, with egg consumption being negatively regarded. Despite this, consumption persists, though not publicly. Adjacent communities not benefitting from ecotourism are perceived by locals of Tortuguero to be the main consumers of eggs. The community also perceives that the majority of eggs extracted from Tortuguero are traded with nearby Caribbean communities. With the final results, we expect to create baseline information regarding local perceptions on the extent of egg consumption within the community, the frequency of consumption, and the drivers of this behavior. The results will also look into the dynamics of egg trade and the impacts of consumption on the socio-economic and conservation aspects. Overall, the results will provide a better understanding of the problem of egg consumption and insights into the challenges of tackling this issue and the improvement of current conservation strategies.