

**THINKING FOR THE FUTURE, EDUCATING IN THE PRESENT; ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND OUTREACH IN TORTUGUERO, COSTA RICA**

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Sea Turtle Conservancy

Tortuguero, Costa Rica is one of the most important nesting beaches in the world for the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), and also supports smaller populations of leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) turtles. The long-term conservation efforts of Sea Turtle Conservancy – STC (with more than 50 years experience working with sea turtles at Tortuguero), Tortuguero National Park (TNP) staff and the local community have been reflected in the documented recovery of the green turtle population nesting at the beach; STC has reported an almost 500% increase in annual nesting since the 1970's. Tortuguero, as a tourist location, has a rather transient population, with an influx of people who are drawn to the area by potential employment opportunities. As such, it is important to constantly raise awareness among community members about sea turtles, threats they face and conservation initiatives. STC's environmental education and outreach program aims to create consciousness in local children, young people and adults with respect to the importance of the area's sea turtles and their habitats. To conserve sea turtles and their vital habitats implies a need to understand the importance of living harmoniously with nature, searching for solutions to problems or changing attitudes to environmental issues such as pollution, climate change or the mismanagement of natural resources. STC, recognizing that education and community outreach are an integral part of the successful Tortuguero program, employs a dedicated Outreach and Education Coordinator to liaise between STC, TNP and community leaders. To achieve the goal of raising community awareness, STC has conducted a variety of activities in recent years including educative talks about sea turtle biology and the local implications of climate change; campaigns to minimize the use of plastic bags in the village, and to reduce artificial lights on the nesting beach; the 'Eco-Wallet' Project that trains high school students to create products from recycled materials, which are sold to raise funds for the school; the Junior Research Assistant Program, which hopes to create future sea turtle conservationists; workshops that provide the community with the necessary tools to allow sustainable local development; a course for local teachers in sea turtle biology, laws and conservation efforts, and a celebratory event on World Turtle Day 2010. Furthermore, STC also participates in other community events, such as TortuFest, an annual cultural and musical festival, and the Eco-Caribbean Festival organized by TNP. STC takes every available opportunity to reach out to local community members and international visitors to Tortuguero, to provide information about the work it conducts in the area. This paper will discuss the innovative methods being used by STC to effectively raise local awareness about sea turtle survival threats and conservation initiatives. The continued success of STC's Tortuguero program is dependent on community support, which can only be given with an adequate understanding of the relevant issues.