

THE LEATHERBACK (*DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA*) NESTING POPULATION IN THE NGÄBE-BUGLE COMARCA AND BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE, PANAMA

Cristina Ordoñez | Xavier Ow Young | Anne Meylan | Peter Meylan | Roldan Valverde
Sea Turtle Conservancy | Sea Turtle Conservancy | Eckerd College | Sea Turtle Conservancy

Since the 17th century, Bocas del Toro (which incorporates the Province of Bocas del Toro and the indigenous Ngäbe-Bugle Comarca) has been recognized as an important area for four species of sea turtle: hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*). Several leatherback nesting beaches have been monitored since the 1990's under the auspices of a variety of government and non-government organizations. Leatherback nesting has been documented at numerous beaches along the Caribbean coast of Panama. A monitoring program conducted by STC since 2003 has identified Chiriquí Beach as the most important leatherback nesting beach in the region, where between 1,000 – 7,000 nests are recorded each season on the 24 km beach. Three additional beaches also have a significant number of leatherback nests: Soropta Beach (500 – 1000 nests / year), and Bluff Beach and Long Beach (100 - 300 nests / year each). Leatherback nesting on this coast extends from mid-February to mid-July, with peak nesting occurring in May. Unlike hawksbill turtles, leatherbacks and their eggs are not consumed by Ngäbe residents and their inhabitants of the communities adjacent to the nesting beach within the Comarca. However, on beaches in the northern part of Bocas Province, leatherback eggs are actively collected and some females are killed and stripped of their eggs and follicles. In 1999, approximately 30 dead leatherbacks were counted during a ground survey of Soropta Beach. Since 2003, the mortality of nesting females has decreased by 90 %, because of the vigilance of the research and monitoring program. The tagging efforts have shown that leatherback turtles have highly variable nesting beach selection patterns. During the same nesting season and in different years, females nesting in the Bocas region also nested on beaches in Costa Rica (Gandoca, Pacuare and Tortuguero), Colombia (Playona), and elsewhere in Panama (Sixaola, San San, Armila and Punta Rincon). In this paper, we present a summary of the distribution and abundance nesting of leatherback turtles in the Bocas del Toro Province and the Ngäbe-Bugle Comarca during the last five years (2013 - 2017) and describe the diverse threats that currently impact this globally important population. Our results provide additional corroboration that the Bocas region leatherbacks are part of a southwest Caribbean metapopulation that includes populations from Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia. Playa Chiriqui continues to be the most important beach for the metapopulation.