

Chiriqui Beach Project

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THE NGÖBE – BUGLÉ COMARCA OF PANAMA.

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Abstract

Sea turtles have long been of economic value to coastal residents of the Bocas del Toro region of Panama, and recently they have become an important resource for growing Ngöbe – Buglé communities.

Chiriquí Beach was described by Dr Archie Carr as one of the most important nesting beaches for hawksbills (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) in the Caribbean. The historical importance of the hawksbill to the economy of people along this coast dates back centuries, when they were hunted extensively for the international tortoiseshell market. In more recent times, Chiriquí Beach was leased to ‘veladors’ who gained exclusive rights to all hawksbill turtles nesting in their one-mile section of beach. Such intensive hunting pressure presumably contributed to the significant decline in hawksbill nesting recorded during aerial and ground surveys in the 1980’s.

It was the indigenous Ngöbe communities that first acknowledged that the turtles needed protection. In 1995 Rio Caña residents took the first steps towards protecting hawksbills nesting on Chiriquí Beach by forming a community group, the Association for the Protection of the Ngöbe-Buglé Natural Resources (APRORENANB). Early turtle conservation efforts were rudimentary, hunting of turtles was only permitted every other

28th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation

year; but this initial effort revealed a community awareness of the responsibility to protect their vulnerable natural resources.

Short periods of research at Chiriquí Beach from 1999 to 2002 confirmed the decline in hawksbill nesting activity, and provided preliminary information about the threats they faced. Discussions began in 2002 among a consortium of interested organizations, national authorities, local conservation groups and the region's indigenous communities, to assess interest in establishing a long-term hawksbill conservation program in the area. The objective was to promote an increase in the small residual hawksbill population nesting in the region. Research activities began in 2003, with the support of the indigenous communities. Their approval was formally confirmed with the signing in 2006 of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ñö Kribo Regional Congress of the Ngöbe-Buglé Comarca, Caribbean Conservation Corporation and the National Environmental Authority of Panama. Since the project's inception nearly all personnel involved in the monitoring aspects have been members of the Ngöbe communities of Rio Caña and Rio Chiriquí, which border Chiriquí Beach. The project currently employs 19 people; 10 beach monitors, 6 cooks, a boat captain, a local field assistant, and a watchman.

An important objective of the project has been to raise awareness in neighboring indigenous communities of the plight of sea turtles through environmental education activities. Efforts have also been made to promote turtle conservation within other autonomous indigenous regions in Panama.

The project can boast many successes; the illegal take of hawksbill females and eggs has been essentially eliminated on Chiriquí Beach, monitoring effort has increased, there is evidence of greater awareness of turtle conservation within the region, and a change in attitude has occurred towards nature conservation in general by local residents. Much remains to be done, but the involvement of the local communities from the outset of the project has been pivotal to its success.