

A PLASTIC BAG BANNING PROCESS: CONVINCING A LOCAL COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT TO STOP USING SINGLE-USE PLASTIC BAGS IN A NESTING AREA IN THE PANAMANIAN CARIBBEAN

Georgina Zamora Quílez

Sea Turtle Conservancy

Bocas del Toro, a fragile archipelago located in the northwest of the Panamanian Caribbean where the Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) has been working since 2003, has a high ecosystem biodiversity, including important nesting, feeding and migrating areas for four sea turtle species. Additionally, poorly-managed tourism, a quiet local government and a community with little environmental awareness have resulted in a region with serious planning issues. This situation is reflected in a solid waste overproduction with no public management nor post-treatment. One of the main issues in Bocas del Toro is the disproportionate use of plastic bags. These are a major threat worldwide; they can take up to 1,000 years to break down, re-entering the environment, posing a continuing threat to wildlife (*WWF, 2016*). At least 267 different species, including sea turtles, are known to have suffered from entanglement or ingestion of plastic marine debris (*Worldwatch Institute*). Just in Bocas del Toro town, an island populated by around 8000 people, 500 bags per supermarket are approximately delivered daily in a regular basis; thus, in two different town cleaning ups, the first of them collected 80% plastic bags of total trash and in the second, 1205 plastic bags were found in 2 days. On account of that, an Environmental Committee called “Zero Waste in Bocas,” conformed by NGOs, including the STC, businesses, local government and civil society was created. The main goal of this Committee was to reach a change of paradigm in the bocatoranian society towards their relationship with their environment. By observing clear requests from a part of the population as well as analyzing the contrast between a challenging community and such a rich and fragile ecosystem, the first approach to follow was plain to see: a single-use-plastic-bag banning regulation with an educational and outreach campaign as a strategy to reduce trash and create a more aware community (*Xanthos, 2017*). Luckily, after several months of working together with the local government, an agreement was signed in April 2017 in order to ban the delivery of single-use plastic bags in supermarkets when shopping in Bocas del Toro district, with a one year period to adjust to the measurement, being the regulation effective in April 2018. In the present case, the strategy the group “Zero Waste in Bocas” used to achieve a single-use plastic bag banning regulation, first and only one in Panama, has focused on three main actions: the first is the creation of local legislation on single-use plastic bags to have a legal backup, the second is an outreach campaign through different paths such as media (local TV, internet groups, local newspapers) and meetings with supermarket owners and local businesses, and the third is education projects, such as empowering local students as environmental community leaders; all these highlighting the importance of environmental education as an essential tool to lead towards a healthy and respectful society. Additionally, interviews to supermarket owners and costumers have been conducted to capture people's perception about plastic bags and the new regulation; same interviews will be done after the regulation is effective, in order to measure the efficiency of the outreach and educational actions, thus ensuring the information is reached and understood by the different stakeholders. Thank you to Suma Aquiline Park, Mitsubishi, Osaka Eco, Sea Turtle Association of Japan, Organist, Nescafe, NYK line, Hikari, Sysmex, OCF Japan, Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium, Chobu Doboku, US Fish & Wildlife Service.