



Sea Turtle Conservation in Matura

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Location

Situated seven miles northwest from Venezuela, Trinidad and its sister island, Tobago, lie southernmost in the chain of Caribbean islands. Trinidad is a globally important nesting site for the endangered leatherback sea turtles. Matura, located on the east coast of Trinidad, represents one of the four major nesting beaches in Trinidad. The rural community of Matura, located 3 miles from the beach, has about 1500 people, whose major livelihoods are subsistence hunting and agriculture.

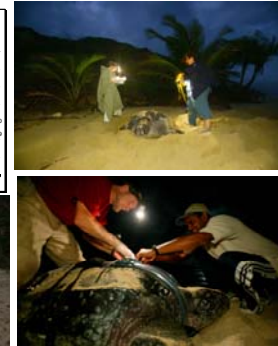
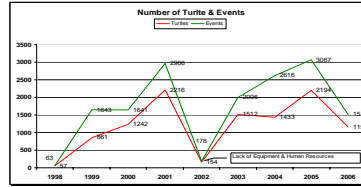


Research

During the turtle season Nature Seekers patrols the beaches of Matura on a nightly basis to protect the nesting turtles from slaughtering and egg collection. Each patrol is made up of a member who has been formally trained as an Honorary Game Warden, a designation created by the government to assist in the enforcement of wildlife conservation laws. Important scientific data are collected on individual turtles during the season regarding turtle numbers (through turtle tagging), measurements, physical condition, weather condition and other information related to hatchlings and hatchling emergencies. A total of 861, 1242, 2216, 1154, 1512, 1433, 2194 and 1159 turtles have been tagged during the 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005 and the 2006 turtle seasons respectively. All emerged nests are excavated so that any trapped baby turtles in the nest can be released. It is estimated that over 600 hatchlings are saved each year by this activity. Adult females are assisted in excavating nests by the patrols when emerged with missing back flippers (caused by sharks and poachers). Occasionally nests are relocated when immediately threatened by erosion.

Historical Use of Turtles

In the 1970s and 1980s, the local community hunted nesting adult Leatherback turtles on Matura beach. Hunters from the village visited the beach regularly in groups to kill a turtle or two. On other occasions, some will visit individually and kill one turtle merely for its front flippers. There were also times where turtles were killed along the shore line to use the fresh flowing blood for attracting sharks. These sharks were then harpooned from the shore with a long lance. There were instances when turtles were tied with rope around the front flippers and carcasses after laying their eggs; this allowed for one or two persons to guide the turtle through the break water by tagging at the rope. They would lead the turtle to the pick up point, where a Bison pulls the turtle off the beach, up a hill, to the village transportation, then to the market. Even hatchlings were used as bait on fish hook to catch sharks. Hunters value the meat, shell and eggs as it can provide a great source of income. No part of the turtle was wasted. Turtle meat, especially the hawksbill and green turtle, have always been favoured for consumption. The turtles have long been associated with virility, and as a consequence the genital organs of male turtles are used to make drinks and powders which are considered to be aphrodisiacs.



Education and Awareness

Nature Seekers have also been trained and certified as guides by the Forestry Division. Members have also been exposed to other technical presentation from international organisation. The group has a strong core membership, an unprecedented history of protecting the Endangered Sea Turtles of Matura, and an international reputation as a model Community Tourism Programme. Nature Seekers acts as a tour guide agency to facilitate turtle-watching and public education. Over 6000 visitors come to Matura annually to view turtles, of whom 15% are children and 10% are from outside Trinidad. The viewing and the bonding of the marine turtles and visitors to prevent harassment and disturbance to the endangered marine reptiles is a major goal of the programme. The total number of visitors is controlled by a carrying capacity of 200 visitors per night. Guides are very keen to answer questions and explain the nesting ritual to these visitors. Visitors are guided to walk closer to the water to prevent compaction of the soil and minimize stepping on emerging baby turtles. The beach is also monitored for erosion and pollution regularly to safeguard and prevent the destruction to the nesting habitat. Nature Seekers is involved with beach patrols and provides tour-guiding services to tourists and other visitors during the nesting season.



Actions

However recognising this problem, the government attempted to set up patrols on the beach in an attempt to deter the poachers. Nevertheless the effort was not sufficient to solve the problem but enough to gain comprehensive insight into the extent of the problem. As a result the government took the initiative to declare the Matura beach a protected area in 1990 that dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles and lush coastal forests. This initiative prompted a unique co-management partnership between the local community and the government wildlife agency. This collaboration led to the formation of a community-based organization known as Nature Seekers in Matura, dedicated to conserving sea turtles while promoting community tourism in the area. This partnership allowed for the community-based organization to decide what should happen in the community regarding the protection of the natural resources with the technical advice from the Forestry Division. This involvement developed the initiatives of Nature Seekers to work towards the protection and conservation of the leatherback turtles. Nature Seekers braved the opportunity that seemed pointless in the eyes of so many and developed strategies as they learned and at the same time reduced the slaughtering of turtles from 30% to zero.



Other Activities

In addition to leading many thousands of visitors, both foreigners and locals to the beach to watch the awesome process of nesting by the giant Leatherback Sea Turtle, Nature Seekers has a proud legacy of community services, including environmental education in schools and other community groups, community advocacy and youth programmes. Nature Seekers is constantly involved in training courses for the development of its members and other villagers whom are always invited to participate. Some of these courses are tour guiding, personal development, business and natural resources management, Host Home management, Craft making, conflict management, communication skills turtle biology and conservation.

The activities in the community attracted a number of young members of the community to Nature Seekers. These individuals were either related to a poacher or have close friends who are sea turtle hunters. Nature Seekers utilized these individuals directly in the patrolling and conservation efforts in working closely with the turtles and visitors. This interaction together with training opportunities builds strong conviction in these young people. The sense of pride and dedication is far beyond the call of duty.



Activities of Nature Seekers

Annually beach Cleanups are conducted before the turtle season to ensure that the beach is free from all debris that can prevent the successful nesting of the Endangered Leatherback Turtles. Nature Seekers feels this activity is of great significance to the turtle season and the survival of marine turtles. By ensuring that successful nesting takes place they will be securing the future population of Marine Turtles nesting on Matura beach and in particular Trinidad and Tobago. A Special educational activity in the form of a Swim turtle Competition was conducted for the first time to instil a sense of fun and games in conservation, which marks the beginning of turtle season.



Partners and Collaborators

The Matura Beach is managed under a collaborative co-management arrangement with the Wildlife Section Forestry Division, the government agency responsible for turtle conservation in Trinidad. Furthermore, Nature Seekers gather and tally all the scientific data on turtle sightings during the season for sharing with government agencies. A national tagging database has been developed under joint management of Nature Seekers, the Institute of Marine Affairs, and the Wildlife Section Forestry Division. As part of national sea turtle conservation efforts Nature Seekers has collaborated on training initiatives for other community-based sea turtle projects in Trinidad & Tobago. Several collaborative research and training initiatives have been carried out through the years. Collaborating organizations include WIDECAST-Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (which serves as scientific partner and advisor to the Matura Turtle Conservation Programme), CANARI-Caribbean Natural Resources Institute. Such collaborative projects range from satellite and radio tracking for swim speed and interesting movement of the leatherback turtles within Trinidad, the Caribbean and the international waters, to community surveys, community tourism, and organizational development. Nature Seekers' members have attended and participated in the annual International Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation, as well as several national and international conferences on sea turtles, organizational management, and tourism.

Acknowledgments and Credits

We would like to extend our appreciation for support in allowing us to participate in this meeting:

Symposium Committee
Earthwatch Institute
Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network
Nature Seekers

