



New record for leatherback turtle nesting

by John Denham, Trustee of Rainforest Concern

Unlike Pacuare in Costa Rica, which combines an important turtle project with an equally important forest initiative, the projects in Panama are purely beach based and designed to protect and monitor the Leatherback turtles during the nesting season from March to July. There are four beaches, three on the mainland in a continuous line of 20 km intersected by three broad rivers. The fourth, Playa Larga is on the nearby island of Bastimentos.



Turtle tracks returning to the ocean

Any account of the 2008 nesting season would be incomplete without a bit of past history. The three mainland beaches, stretching from the Costa Rican border, have always been important nesting sites for Leatherbacks but were never protected until recently. Unlike the Costa Ricans who poach Leatherback nests mercilessly for their eggs but do not like the meat (though Green Turtle meat is very popular) the Panamanians have always killed the Leatherbacks for their meat.

A few years ago, a walk along any one of the three beaches was a sad sight; rotting carcasses strewn across the beach, the work of unscrupulous poachers. Around 25-30 adult females were slaughtered on each of the three beaches every nesting season. For a colony of only a few hundred, that was the road to extinction.

Because Leatherbacks nest over a wide area that would include both Pacuare and Panamanian beaches in the same season we realised that our work would never be truly effective unless the situation in Panama was tackled. The evidence from tags was clear. A turtle nesting at Pacuare could lay seventy miles down the coast 10 days later on a Panamanian beach where a poacher might be waiting with a machete.

The first patrols were started in 2002 on Soropta, the worst of the killing beaches. The team consisted of a biologist, six young men from the nearest community, a cook and a few volunteers from overseas, all living in a renovated beach hut. The effect was immediate and since then, though nests have been lost to poachers, no turtles have been killed on the 7 km of beach that we patrol every night of the season.

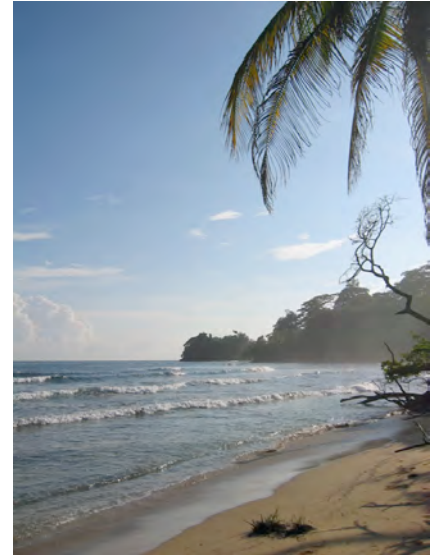
After Soropta came Sixaola beach. The project, which has been community based from the start, is led by a young local Panamanian trained in turtle monitoring and supported by local 'assistants' who live behind this deserted and inaccessible stretch of coastline. In order to deter poachers the beach, which borders Costa Rica, is patrolled on a nightly basis, nests are counted and those turtles not already tagged are tagged.

Two years after Sixaola, the community project on the third beach, San San, was started. All three projects involve local people and are supervised by our Mexican biologist Cristina, based in nearby Bocas del Toro.

Against this historical background, this year's nesting figures were most encouraging. Soropta had over 500 nests, the highest ever, Sixaola almost 400 and San San just over 300. Playa Larga, had 150 Leatherback nests (plus a good number of rare Hawksbills) making a total of 1350 nests.



Measuring a Leatherback turtle



View of Soropta beach

Though the killing appears to have been nearly halted, only one turtle was killed on San San, the poachers are relentless. Serious losses were suffered on Sixaola from Costa Rican invaders who come 50 miles down the coast in their 30 knot boats on a calm day, quickly locate up to 25 nests, excavate them and speed back to the north to sell the eggs in the bars of Limon'. To combat this, we have had meetings with the Panamanian Environment Ministry who have strongly requested that a police post be placed on the beach at Sixaola. On Soropta there were also poaching problems this year but the measures that we plan for next year should be effective.

We are very pleased that it is the communities who are providing the people who protect and monitor the turtles. They receive training from biologists and each year less supervision is needed. Altogether about 20 men and women earn some money from working on these beaches, in an area where there is no possibility of finding any regular work.

Running these projects costs money and Rainforest Concern funds all four projects, which are managed by EWT. So much has been achieved, in what is a relatively short time we have turned killing beaches into safe havens. If we are to truly bring back this colony of Leatherbacks back from the brink of extinction it is vital that this work continues.