

# Record nesting season for Leatherback turtles!

by John Denham, Trustee of Rainforest Concern

All the Leatherback turtle projects we either manage or supervise had record nesting numbers this season, a wonderful turnaround from the recent years when the beaches were unprotected and littered with the carcasses of slaughtered turtles.

Soropta beach counted over 550 nests, the highest yet. Poaching was less severe this year owing to the absence of 'The Prince', a famous poacher from further along the beach who was drowned in the floods in the early part of the year. His demise was unfortunate but has certainly made our job a little easier.

Managing Soropta is a difficult and demanding job and we were fortunate to have such a good leader and biologist as Ana Maria Vasquez from Colombia. It is excellent news that she is coming back to Soropta in 2010. As usual, we employed guards from a nearby banana plantation and eight locals were employed by the project.

While we were being flooded at Pacuare, heavy rains were also causing devastation in Panama. The Changuinola River, which reaches the sea near to our Soropta station, was so powerful that it washed away the big spit of sand that formed a large part of the nesting beach we protected. We therefore had to commit to covering a further 3 kms of patrolling to achieve the same result.

Volunteers and visitors to Soropta come mainly from the nearby resort town of Bocas del Toro, many at short notice and usually just for a night or two, which is not really long enough to be of any support to the resident team.

Soropta is a difficult project to manage. It is isolated, and bringing food or people from Bocas is very expensive but it is so important that we maintain it. Soropta was the worst of the 'killing beaches' for Leatherbacks until we set up the project to protect and patrol the beach in 2001. Its success led the way to the protection of the adjoining beaches San San and Sixaola, both of which are subsidized by Rainforest Concern and supervised by our Mexican biologist Cristina, though run by the local communities.

Sixaola beach is isolated and inaccessible and a reliable man, Huascar, has been trained to work with turtles. He has now recruited and trained 6 men from local communities to work on the beach during the season and they are paid for



Photo: Katie Honey

A Leatherback hatchling's mad dash for the open sea

each night they patrol. They are glad of the chance to earn a small salary in an area where otherwise no work is available. Huascar and his team counted 520 leatherback nests this season, the highest number since we started protection 9 years ago. San San recorded nearly 450 leatherback nests, making a total of over 1,500 nests for the 20 kms of the three mainland beaches, which stretch South-west from the Costa Rican border.

Playa Larga is the fourth beach we protect and is quite separate from the others as it is on an island called Bastamentos. It is a lovely short golden beach facing onto the open sea and is visited by Hawksbill turtles as well as Leatherbacks.

Isobel Petersen from the US ran the project this year, supported by a local research assistant. Life is pretty basic on Playa Larga. Unlike Soropta, there is no cook or flushing lavatories and food must be brought from Bocas once a week. However volunteers love this simple Robinson Crusoe style of life and they recorded an impressive 135 Leatherbacks.

Panama continues to be a great success story and vital to the survival of the Leatherback. May I ask you to please think about making a donation to Rainforest Concern to help fund this essential work.

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*Of course if you want to get really involved, you might even consider volunteering! All you need to do is go to [www.turtleprotection.org](http://www.turtleprotection.org) for detailed information and then email **Carlos Fernandez** at [carlos57fer@yahoo.com](mailto:carlos57fer@yahoo.com) to check on availability.*