

PANAMA

population: **2.8 million**
capital: **Panama City**
total land area: **7,443,000 ha**

primary forest 1990: **3,706,000 ha**
primary forest 2005: **3,023,000**
primary forest lost 1990-2005: **683,000 ha**



PANAMA

More beaches protected in Panama

by John Denham, Trustee of Rainforest Concern

Our turtle projects in Panama, managed by EWT and funded by Rainforest Concern made great progress in 2006.

It is four years since we started work in Panama, when we realized just how many Leatherbacks were being slaughtered on the 20 km of unprotected beaches, which stretch southeast from the Costa Rican border. We estimated that 75-100 were being killed every year and, if continued, this would have meant extinction of the Caribbean Leatherback colony.



Carlos, Helen and Clara at Playa Larga

Turtles and turtle eggs are theoretically protected by law throughout Latin America, but poachers still take turtle eggs wherever they can. Green turtles are illegally killed in Costa Rica and by the thousand in Nicaragua. The meat of the Leatherback however is considered too oily and in Central America, Panama is the only country where it is killed and eaten.

In Panama, Soropta Beach was the worst of the killing beaches and the first we started to protect. It is now an established project where its 7 km of beach are patrolled every night from mid March to mid July. We also took on Playa Larga, a smaller beach on the nearby island of Bastimentos, where both Leatherback and Hawksbill turtles come to nest and last year we started a community project on another killing beach, Sixaola, a remote 7 km beach starting at the Costa Rican border.

This year we plan to replicate the Sixaola formula on yet another killing beach, San San, also of 7 km, which lies between Soropta and Sixaola. If that is successful, we will be protecting 20 km of continuous Panamanian beach, all of which was once a killing field of the giant Leatherback.

During the 2006 season we counted 359 nests on Soropta beach, a healthy increase over the

previous year. About 15 nests were poached but no turtles killed, and on Playa Larga, 140 Leatherbacks and 22 Hawksbills nested and none were killed.

Both these beaches have sites where we base a biologist and volunteers and Soropta also has 6 local guards and a cook. (see website www.turtleprotection.org)

Perhaps the biggest success of the 2006 season was on Sixaola beach, where an estimated 25 Leatherbacks were killed in 2005. To turn this from a killing beach into a nesting haven for Leatherbacks needed someone special to lead the project. We were fortunate to find Huascar, a Panamanian who had been trained at the Gandoca Turtle project in Costa Rica. He was prepared to "have a go". He lodged with one of the few families that live near the beach and set about recruiting six local men as beach guards. With minimal funding, he recruited and trained the local guards, tagged many turtles, patrolled every night from mid March to the end of June and kept the poachers away. On this beach they counted 340 nests and no turtles were killed and this is the community-based project we aim to replicate this year on San San Beach, jointly with Gandoca.



Huascar, who led the project on Sixaola beach

Natalia, our Colombian biologist, has been running the Soropta project single-handed for 3 exhausting years and its success is very much due to her. She will join us at Pacuare this year and her place will be taken by the Canadian biologist, Matt Hammond, assisted by his wife Jen. Matt spent two years at Pacuare, first as a volunteer in 2002 and the following year in charge of the North Station.

Ramon, ex-Research Assistant at Pacuare has been in charge of Playa Larga for two years and will join Natalia at Pacuare. Finally, Helen Cross from the



Leatherback hatchling making a dash to the sea

UK was a Research Assistant at Pacuare and has many years of turtle experience. She will take over from Ramon at Playa Larga this year.

2006 was a good year for us in Panama. If we can protect San San beach this season, 2007 could be even better, especially for the turtles!

To continue protecting turtles in Panama each season, we need your help. If you would like to volunteer at Soropta or Playa Larga to monitor the beaches and keep nesting Leatherbacks safe, please contact us on 0207 229 2093.



Volunteers help to repair a roof at Playa Larga