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Local ANAM official, Hernández Bonilla, holds a hawksbill turtle he helped rescue during a marine patrol in Bocas del Toro Province

# USAID PROGRAM FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF AQUATIC RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES

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# PROGRESS REPORT ON PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT SEA TURTLE PROTECTION EFFORTS IN THE COMARCA NGÖBE-BUGLÉ AND BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE, PANAMA

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PROTECTION EFFORTS IN THE COMARCA NGÖBE-BUGLÉ AND BOCAS DEL TORO  
PROVINCE, PANAMA



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report is to provide a summary of efforts by Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) to form alliances with private businesses to support improved sea turtle protection efforts by government authorities such as the National Environment Authority (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente - ANAM) and the Panama Aquatic Resources Authority (Autoridad de Recursos Acuáticos de Panama - ARAP) in Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé, Panama. This work was conducted by STC as part of the Program for the Management of Aquatic Resources and Economic Alternatives in Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé, Panama, from 1 September, 2010 – 1 April, 2011. As of the time of this report, STC has made some preliminary attempts to form partnership with private entities for the benefit of sea turtle conservation in the region. However, the progress described herein has been substantially limited due to our inability to hire a dedicated staff person to work on such partnerships. STC's original budget proposal for this task included funding to support a full-time coordinator who would oversee this task. With funding for this position eliminated during contract negotiations with Chemonics, STC attempted to achieve all of the tasks and deliverables for year one with its existing scientific and educational outreach staff. This has proven to be a limiting factor in our ability to aggressively pursue private partnerships. In STC's proposal for year-two, we again request sufficient funding to allow for the hiring of a dedicated person to work on this task. We continue to believe that private partnerships benefiting sea turtle conservation can be achieved in Bocas del Toro with sufficient resources to pursue this goal.

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, sea turtles have played an important role in the economy of Bocas del Toro Province, Panama. Coastal residents have relied on sea turtles as a source of food and also to provide income through the commercialization of products and by-products. Such was the extensive and unsustainable use of sea turtles in the area that populations have decreased dramatically, and species are either endangered, or critically endangered. However, in recent years awareness of the predicament faced by sea turtles in the region has increased, and there are now numerous organizations and communities working together to protect sea turtles and their habitats, specifically from anthropogenic threats.



Indigenous fishermen with harpoons in the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé



One of the continued threats facing sea turtle populations in Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé is the capture of turtles (both adult and juvenile) in near-shore coastal waters. Artisanal fishers, residents of indigenous coastal communities, will occasionally target sea turtles; however, typically they are taken opportunistically when encountered by fishermen searching for other species, such as lobster. Marine patrols by the government agencies charged with protecting natural resources, particularly species in danger of extinction such as sea turtles, have frequently encountered fishers engaging in illegal activities, even within protected areas such as the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park (BINMP) in Bocas del Toro Province. Officials have powers to confiscate equipment and charge offenders, and so their presence will often act as a deterrent to fishermen.

However, local authorities typically have limited resources available to conduct patrols on a regular basis. As part of its activities for the MAREA Program, STC is attempting to develop public-private partnerships that can provide financial support to local ANAM and ARAP offices in order to increase the frequency with which they conduct patrols to enforce sea turtle protection laws. Helping to subsidize patrol efforts should result in more citations for illegal fishing activities, confiscation of equipment such as harpoons, and the release of captured live turtles. The object is to create a sustainable fund that will lead to improved law enforcement and better protection of marine resources in Bocas del Toro.

## **PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN BOCAS DEL TORO**

STC's work at developing financial support and alliances in partnership with private entities in Panama and Bocas del Toro is just starting to take shape. As described above, progress has been hindered in part by the lack of a dedicated staff person for this work. Additionally, it has proven to be challenging for STC to develop local business support, in part because many of these private entities are themselves struggling in the current economic climate. Revenues from tourism are down, and businesses are reluctant to share already scarce resources without full knowledge of how their support of improved protection efforts by ANAM and ARAP will translate into more revenue for themselves and how it will help sustain resource protection. As a result, the initial phase of STC's work has focused on building relationships, trust and understanding about the turtle conservation program, threats to marine turtle resources and steps needed to alleviate these threats.

This phase of the work has involved one-on-one meetings and interactions with individual shop and business owners designed to introduce them to the project. Educational information about sea turtles and results from the project have been



shared with multiple business owners, and STC has worked collaboratively with some members of the business community to address common interests in marine and coastal conservation. For example, when an out-of-country TV production company was conducting work at Bluff Beach that threatened sea turtles and other coastal resources, STC teamed up with local hotels and shop owners to present this information to local authorities. STC Research Coordinator (RC), Cristina Ordoñez was appointed by the ad-hoc group as a spokesperson for their joint interests in the matter, and she met both with government officials (ANAM and the local mayor of Bocas del Toro) and representatives from the production company to make recommendations designed to alleviate threats to resources. STC's recommendations were adopted nearly in their entirety, sea turtle nests were protected, and STC built considerable goodwill among the business community in Bocas del Toro. While this occurred just prior to the start of the MAREA project, this situation at Bluff Beach is described as an example of how STC has worked in the past with local stakeholder groups concerned about activities affecting sea turtle conservation in Bocas del Toro.

In this next phase of STC's work, we will begin approaching local business leaders with requests for financial assistance to increase ANAM and ARAP patrols that would result in fewer incidents like that with the TV production crew. STC will set up one-on-one meetings to convince shop owners about their common interests in protecting sea turtles and other coastal resources within Bocas del Toro Province and how these interests will be protected by providing a modest level of support for marine patrol activities.

In the time frame of this report, STC staff also has worked diligently to maintain the strong working relationship that the organization has fostered with the relevant government authorities in Panama – with the goal of improving protection for endangered marine resources in the region in the future. By maintaining continuous contact with the agencies responsible for enforcing environmental laws, STC is maintaining open communication and improving understanding by government officials of the current threats to sea turtles in Bocas del Toro. While no additional marine patrols have been confirmed, ANAM has contacted STC for advice concerning turtles that have been killed on nesting beaches, and that have been encountered with injuries inflicted by people using fishing gear. For example, STC Research Coordinator Cristina Ordonez was invited to accompany ANAM officials to investigate an incident at Soropta Beach on 30 April 30, 2011, in which three leatherback females were killed on the nesting beach.



Leatherback turtle killed at Soropta Beach



The RC was approached to provide technical assistance and logistical support to the park rangers. This incident occurred during Semana Santa (Holy Week), when many people believe that turtles can be eaten as part of religious customs. The increased presence of officials on the beach, and the stir created by the leatherback killings likely resulted in fewer animals being taken from the beach by locals, though this is difficult to confirm.

The fact that additional ANAM patrols have not yet occurred is no reason to abandon STC's strategy of working with the agency to make this happen. The delay in action is an unavoidable situation created by the constant state of flux within the Panamanian government. STC worked as hard as possible to liaise with the relevant government officials to improve protection efforts for sea turtles through increased patrols and vigilance, but our efforts have been diminished by turnover in local officials. STC will maintain constant contact with the relevant authorities, and will remain insistent that they collaborate and conduct patrols.

It has been disappointing to observe that despite all the efforts of STC staff, it has proved extremely difficult to coordinate additional marine patrols with ANAM officials. Considerable time was spent visiting regional government offices to make introductions to new ANAM staff as a result of frequent changes in personnel; such introductions and the presentation of the STC sea turtle project are vital to ensure that ANAM remains aware of the regional and global importance of the Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé for sea turtle conservation initiatives.

In addition, as part of the Tour de Turtles 2011, an on-line sea turtle migration tracking and education event, STC successfully approached the private sector to raise sponsorship for the 'competing' turtles. Each turtle within the 'race' was supported by a different company; at Chiriquí Beach, Panama, the two leatherback turtles were sponsored by Casa Tortuga and Grooveshark, and at Tortuguero, Costa Rica, Shark Reef Aquarium sponsored one of the green turtles that was tracked. Money raised through these private-public partnerships was used to support STC initiatives in Panama and Costa Rica.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continued interaction with government enforcement agencies to provide information about current threats to sea turtles and critical habitats in Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé.
2. Collaborate with MAREA project partner Solimar to develop alliances with local businesses and organizations that might be willing to support environmental protection efforts by ANAM and ARAP. For year two of the MAREA project STC plans to hire an additional staff member to focus



exclusively on establishing these alliances and developing private-public partnerships to raise funds to support sea turtle conservation and protection efforts.

3. Conduct targeted public awareness campaign to document the threats faced by sea turtles in the region, with specific focus on hotels and tour operators in Bocas del Toro; and information about how organizations or individuals can support protection initiatives.

4. Remain involved in all local festivals and public meetings, to highlight the global significance of Bocas del Toro for sea turtles; and to acknowledge the role of local communities in key research and conservation initiatives aimed at protecting the area's threatened sea turtle populations and critical habitats.



ANAM and police officials conducting a search of a fishing boat during a marine

5. Generate and manage funds secured from private businesses to increase marine patrols by ANAM and ARAP officials; work with these agencies to coordinate a regular patrol schedule, targeting problem areas within Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé. While it was difficult to establish a regular patrol schedule with government agencies during the time period of this report, it is hoped that continued pressure from STC and other stakeholders groups in the region about the need for constant vigilance by ANAM will ensure that more coordinated patrols are conducted in the future.

6. Document all marine patrols to provide accurate data regarding levels of illegal fishing activities within protected areas, with specific reference to the incidence of take of sea turtles by artisanal fishers.

7. Work with government agencies and coastal communities, in particular with indigenous fishers, to highlight the status of sea turtles populations within Bocas del Toro, to raise awareness that fishing for turtles is an illegal activity, and to stress the negative impacts to the local turtle populations caused by unsustainable fishing activities.

8. Expand the Tour de Turtles program in 2012, to attract businesses and corporations from the private sector to provide funds that can be used to improve sea turtle conservation and protection efforts in Bocas del Toro Province and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé.