

SOS Summary Report 2006

Ever since SOS Tobago's inception one of our main goals was to help protect the nesting sea-turtle population from the poaching that occurs on our shores. After six years patrolling our three index beaches, Turtle Beach, Stone Haven Bay and Mt Irvine Back Bay we have been able to monitor the nesting population, curb poaching and assist Tobago's eco-tourism potential.

Our patrols began on the 1st of March and ended 30th August covering the peak nesting months of April-July. This year, we have continued with the tagging of Leatherback sea turtles on our index beaches that was started last year. We use Monel livestock tags applied with special pliers on both their rear flippers. We began to tag Hawksbills and Greens sea turtles this year after a visit to a sea turtle group called 'BSTRP' (Barbados Sea-Turtle Restoration Project) based at UWI, Cave Hill, Barbados. These tags are similar to the ones we use on leatherbacks, the only difference is both the tags and pliers are smaller. Tagging nesting sea turtles is a standard scientific method used worldwide to assess a local nesting female population, tagging identifies each turtle as an individual and provides invaluable information about how often she lays and where. Sea turtles take decades to reach reproductive age and that even at that stage, the same females will usually only lay every two-three years. It can therefore take many years of tagging to really predict overall population size and trends so consistency in the tagging effort is critical.

SOS patrols would not be possible if it were not for our small group of local patrollers, tour guides, honorary game wardens and foreign volunteers from the University of Glasgow, Scotland that have been sending students to Tobago for the past three years, including 2006. This year Napier University, Scotland sent three students and St. Andrews University, Scotland sent one student. We have had difficulties in the past getting more locally based patrollers the main reason being because beach patrols take place between 9pm and 5am and consistent funding does not exist to pay Tobago patrollers as it does in Trinidad. We hope to work more closely with UWI next year to get more local student volunteers and continue to look forward to patrol funding eventually coming in from the THA.

This year we tagged 55 leatherbacks and 3 hawksbills with more than 80% coming back to lay on one of our index beaches. Most leatherbacks we tagged returned about 4-5 times, with one leatherback even nesting eight times! On Turtle Beach we had 169 leatherback nests and 4 hawksbill nests. Stone Haven Beach (Grafton Beach) had 36 leatherback nests, 1 hawksbill nest and 1 Green nest (unfortunately, someone poached the eggs from that nest). While Mt Irvine Back Bay had 33 leatherback nests and 4 hawksbill nests. We also had three sea turtles, one hawksbill and two leatherbacks, that were tagged in Grenada laying on Mt Irvine Back Bay this year and a leatherback tagged on Matura Beach, Trinidad nesting on Turtle Beach.

We had one poaching that occurred on Turtle Beach in May where a leatherback's right front flipper was cut off and she was left to bleed to death, although the police did

eventually arrive, there were no arrests. This occurred before patrols started at 9pm although there were already tour guides on the beach unfortunately no one was in that particular area at the time. Another incident worth mentioning was when one of our head patrollers intercepted five men tying up a nesting leatherback on Stone Haven Bay. As they were interrupted, the men fled and the leatherback returned to sea but the patroller managed to check her tags. An hour later the same leatherback returned to the other end of the same beach and successfully laid without harm. There were additional incidents of poaching around the island, particularly in Argyle and the Moriah-Castara area. As always Channel 5 was extremely helpful in spreading the word to the general public, we were featured on their morning program twice and a twenty minute piece was aired throughout the season; public feedback to this coverage was encouraging.

Approximately 24% of nesting turtles on Turtle Beach and 11% of the Grafton turtles were disturbed by lights. On Turtle Beach all of these incidents occurred in “zone 2” which is the area directly in front of the hotel and the adjacent Fisheries building. Lighting disturbances are recorded when the turtle exhibits disoriented behaviour when returning to the sea, moving purposefully towards the lights instead of the water. In all cases reported, the patrollers had to guide the turtle back to the water by shielding the lights etc. No efforts were made by the hotel (Turtle Beach by Rex Resorts) to shield or redirect lights this season, despite giving their verbal assurance that it would be done during a site inspection in February with visiting specialists from the Barbados Sea Turtle Restoration Project at UWI-Cavehill.

Traditionally the March to July months are the slow season for tourist arrivals but we have been noticing a trend where more tourists are coming and returning to specifically see our sea turtles nesting. This year our patrollers counted almost 3000 visitors to our index beaches to witness the sea turtles nest between March and July. At least 10 different tour guides were recorded on the beaches regularly (i.e. at least once a week throughout peak nesting season) with clients and this is an improvement from previous years when only 3-4 guides came out regularly. However, the majority of visitors to the main nesting beach, Turtle Beach, continue to be the guests from the Turtle Beach Hotel who are generally unaccompanied by a tour guide. Patrollers recorded crowd/people control problems at approximately 11% of the turtle nesting events that were witnessed on Turtle Beach this year. Such problems were encountered at only 5% of events on Grafton and no such problems were reported from Back Bay. Generally such incidents became less frequent as the season progressed.

SOS Tobago has been working with the Tobago Tour Guide Association to help encourage certified tour guides to do turtle tours and encourages the many tourists who contact us directly to go out with the certified guides. Each year we host lectures for the tour guides about sea turtles to help improve the standard of their tours and to make sure they are giving their clients the correct information. We also hold weekly lectures at the Turtle Beach Hotel so that those guests already directly on the beach will have a better understanding of “turtle friendly” behaviour as they are unlikely to be accompanied by a guide. During the nesting season SOS beach patrollers and certified tour guides maintain contact on the beaches to spread the workload and the tour guides also give us

information about nesting and poaching activities on the beaches further north where there are not yet patrols.

For 2007, we are hoping to introduce beach patrols on the northern end of the island where the poaching of Hawksbills and Green sea-turtle has gone unchecked for decades and also to more research on the sea turtle hatchlings and their mortality rates. There is a lot more work to do to ensure that these incredible creatures do not go extinct on our small island, like the fox, ocelot, red-brocket deer, manatee and sloth all which have been wiped out from Tobago never to be seen again. Ultimately, the future of Tobago's sea turtles depends not only on the efforts of small groups like SOS Tobago but perhaps more importantly on the conscious choices of each individual. With this in mind we would like to thank all those who supported our program this year, particularly Friends of Conservation, UK that made it possible for us to offer our first youth internship (see Jason's story attached.). We look forward to increased public support for sea turtle conservation not only during the next nesting season but throughout the year.



Jason's Story

Thanks to the support of Friends of Conservation, UK we were able to offer our first youth internship in 2006. At 22, Jason was a little older than the high school leaving age that we had thought to target but in all other ways he was a perfect fit for the program. He was without regular employment, he was very much a part of the community and was therefore extremely familiar with our nesting beaches and the local attitudes. His enthusiasm for the work preceded any knowledge of remuneration possibilities so when we became confident in his skills on the beach, we were only too happy to officially offer him the position of youth intern so that we could have him on board "full time".



By the time the UK university volunteers arrived in June, Jason was a full-fledged member of the patrol team and played an integral role in supervising the new international recruits, both on and off the beach. Jason's story was perhaps the highlight of our year and one that was even featured on the local television morning program during the season in hopes of inspiring other youths to get more involved; especially our young men with a natural love for the outdoors that may not have yet found a productive outlet for their particular skills or interests. Despite having never finished high school, Jason has now even been nominated for a local Youth of the Year award as a result of his work with SOS and the turtles. We are incredibly grateful to FOC, UK for making it possible for us to work as intensively with Jason as we did and we hope that an annual FOC/SOS youth internship might be possible. Below Jason summarizes his experience in his own words:

"My name is Jimmy Jason Ayres and I worked with SOS for just over five months this turtle season and in this organization I have learnt a lot of things that I didn't see in my future and I think that they have done the best for me and I want to keep working for this company just because I love it and it gave me something that makes me see goodness in myself and others.

Doing patrols at night with the others showed me that this job is something that can make you know people and even know yourself better. SOS on the whole has given me a new lifestyle to look at that is making me see my future much more better than before. I want to thank everyone that made this possible for me and to let them know that I will always be a part of this organization."