



## ANNUAL REPORT 2007

### Background

SOS Tobago is made up of a small core of concerned volunteers and has been a registered community based organization (CBO) since 2001 with strong linkages to the broader NGO structure of Environment TOBAGO. Our mission is “to conserve Tobago’s sea turtles and their local coastal and marine habitat through community based initiatives in research, education and eco-tourism.” **The scope of our activities is determined annually by the availability of human and financial resources.** The success of our efforts to save these gentle giants and in fact our very survival as a group depends largely on your active support... Thank you!

### Synopsis

**This year, we focussed mainly on expanding our patrols beyond the main nesting beaches** in the Black Rock area in response to the rampant poaching that has continued and to some extents increased in the rural areas since our inception. We began by exploring what was happening in terms of reported turtle activity in two key areas of Castara and Charlotteville and determining what was possible in terms of host community commitment. We then facilitated increased manpower support from June by also placing university volunteers in Charlotteville, which had emerged as the stronger choice for a rural base. It was an interesting experiment at this stage in our development for although there has been some SOS presence in Charlotteville since 2001 and like-minded villagers welcomed the patrols, the degree to which community members could contribute on a voluntary basis was somewhat limited. Our resources were significantly stretched at the expense of our education and eco-tourism programs although some activities in these areas were still maintained. **This year, like the others, has reinforced the need to secure a meaningful source of funding for the basic annual activities of the group** so that we can continue to address the recurring issues within our main focus area of Black Rock and expand to include the wider community.

*SOS Tobago Annual Report ©2007*

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago, Black Rock Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

(868) 357-2862

info@sos-tobago.org

www.sos-tobago.org

# Research

**Patrols started in mid-March** with morning walks almost daily and evening shifts (8 – 11) four nights a week on our main beaches in Black Rock (Turtle Beach, Grafton and Back Bay). This pace continued until nesting increased in mid-April at which point shifts were introduced with a late shift coming on Turtle Beach (11 - 3) and one split shift on Back Bay (10 - 2). As nesting increased, the late shift started coming on later and staying out later so there was occasionally a gap on Turtle Beach in the middle of the night that was covered by tour guides and hotel security. The night patrols were supported by frequent day time checks to verify nesting numbers, this was particularly important as there were not always sufficient volunteers to cover all the beaches every night.

**In May, we began a pilot volunteer scheme with the UWI Bio-Sci Society** through which groups of 4 students, preferably with prior turtle experience, were invited to patrol with SOS in exchange for lodging. This was an attempt to encourage more local (T+T) youth to possibly get more involved with conservation in Tobago and to help us with the manpower necessary for full time patrols of the Turtle Beach, Grafton and Back Bay areas. This project continued until July and there is tremendous room for it to be further developed in time for next season so that it better serves our needs as well as those of the students by targeting just the ones that were really responsive for longer periods of time and securing more affordable accommodations than the local guesthouses, perhaps through a 'host home' or 'SOS House' program.

**In June, two contingents of Scottish students arrived** to assist with patrols from Glasgow and Napier universities. This was our fourth Glasgow expedition and they settled quickly in Black Rock and assisted with patrols until the end of July. The larger Napier group was a new expedition but recruited and led by Grant Walker who patrolled with us last year as an independent student volunteer. This group was posted with supervision to Charlotteville and covered those beaches as well as venturing over to L'Anse Fourmi and/or Dead Bay once a week working with a few committed community members in those areas.

**Patrols continued in Black Rock and Charlotteville until the end of July** and despite a national shortage of leatherback tags this season, **almost thirty new females were tagged on our index beaches** and we also got a **ten confirmed tag returns from our initial tagging efforts in 2005**. Hatchlings also started emerging in June and July and we maintained a program of nest excavation to free hatchlings trapped due to sand compaction, to ascertain the overall success of the nest and to collect samples for ongoing

*SOS Tobago Annual Report ©2007*

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago, Black Rock Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

(868) 357-2862

info@sos-tobago.org

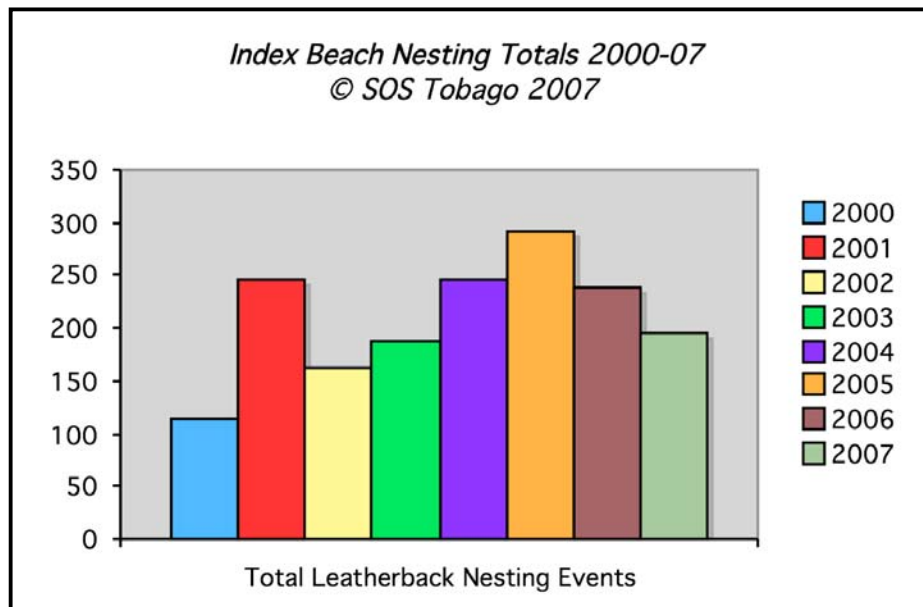
www.sos-tobago.org

hatchling mortality research at UWI.

Through the Charlotteville program we were able to utilize the training and equipment received at the Barbados Sea Turtle Restoration Project last year and started tagging hawksbills for the first time in Tobago. **Twenty one hawksbills were tagged** in total with the vast majority recorded on Campbelton Bay in **Charlotteville** itself. **Almost 200 leatherback nests were recorded in total on the index beaches**, this does not represent the total number of nests laid, simply the number that we were able to confirm. Back Bay, for example, is a very dynamic beach in terms of sand movement and experienced ideal nesting conditions this year and higher than normal nesting activity. However, due to staffing and safety issues, Grafton/Back Bay patrols were unavoidably reduced at times so this would have significantly affected our confirmed totals. On Turtle Beach, which was more consistently monitored, **nesting numbers were also lower than usual**; the overall season started quite late then despite an encouraging peak in June, things slowed down quite abruptly in July although reports of leatherback nesting did seem more widespread than usual. Interestingly enough, **Trinidad and many other islands reported their busiest nesting seasons ever**, perhaps some of Tobago's turtles ended up there or perhaps our fragile but to date seemingly consistent population really has finally entered a downward spiral... only further consistent monitoring will tell.

**Our patrol team this year consisted of two-three people in the Black Rock area, two in the Charlotteville area and one senior patroller who moved back and forth.** The two senior patrollers who covered the late shifts in Black Rock were offered a stipend of \$2500 TT a month (March-July) as the hours of work made it impossible to also hold down a traditional 'day job'. The Charlotteville team was also nominally reimbursed (\$1500 TT each a month (June-July) for their time and use of their boats as these rural patrols tended to be all night events due to the remoteness of the beaches. The increase in the number of university volunteers this year did little to decrease the need for trained, local patrollers and actually put extra strain on our senior patrollers, as they were required to take on a supervisory role. This year, SOS paid out \$36,000 TT directly to our patrollers, this does not include the costs associated with phone cards, flashlights and accommodations for the UWI volunteers. This money came solely from T-shirt sales over the years and the administrative overhead allotments from previous projects and it was not nearly enough to ensure the kind of coverage and commitment necessary to sustain a professional monitoring program as we would like to do.

The multitude of scientific, social and safety issues faced by our patrol teams nightly requires not only training but also experience and it helps if one is naturally a patient and calm person. This being the case, recruitment and training of suitable individuals from within the communities needs to start early and they need to be remunerated appropriately to secure their commitment, even if only for the duration of the season. There is to date, no government funding support for the patrols, as there is in Trinidad, despite repeated proposals and discussions. **Without a well-paid patrol force it is impossible for us to guarantee the kind of beach coverage required for accurate scientific records and optimal turtle protection.** The time has clearly come to seek major funding from beyond the governmental purse so that patrols can be continued and developed more professionally with or without financial support from the Tobago House of Assembly though we will always strive to maintain a collaborative working relationship with them in all aspects of our programming.



## Education

Despite the lack of sufficient manpower and financial resources, we still managed to give a handful of school talks and participated in Environment Tobago's summer camp in Goodwood and Buccoo Reef Trust's 'Sea, Sun and Science' program. While there were no specific outreach activities conducted in the Black Rock area this year, we did have meetings in Castara and Charlotteville with people from those communities as we sought to establish expanded patrols. We also conducted a **training program for the Honourary Game Wardens in collaboration with the Department of Natural**

*SOS Tobago Annual Report ©2007*

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago, Black Rock Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

(868) 357-2862

info@sos-tobago.org

www.sos-tobago.org

**Resources and the Environment** where the wardens were introduced to the basic principles of turtle conservation and to the standard methods of data collection. The SOS Training Manual published in 2005 was provided free of charge to the participants and SOS also provided refreshments; the government provided the space and supplementary training materials.

We presented live **twice on Tobago Channel 5's morning program** during the nesting season to keep the general public informed of our activities and to invite the wider community to participate in sea turtle conservation. Finally, we started amassing video footage for an eventual documentary and educational short films in collaboration with the new Film Unit at BRT and were very lucky to capture hatchlings and a day time nesting on film as well as some lovely in water shots; this project should be completed by the end of the year and we hope that the end product will be an invaluable teaching aid and fundraiser in the coming years.

## Eco-Tourism

The Honourary Game Warden training workshop was opened to the registered tour guides, however a specific follow up training with the tour guides was not conducted this year. Contacts from prior training sessions were key participants in our meetings in Castara and Charlotteville. Unfortunately, regular hotel lectures were curtailed this year due to financial and human constraints, however, this regular activity has been in some ways adopted by a few of the tour guides so through them information continued to get out to the tourists.

However, we did pass on **updated in-room information to the management of Turtle Beach by Rex Resorts** and we discussed with hotel security the possibility of providing the hotel with an instructional 'Turtlewatching Guidelines' DVD that could be shown every evening; this idea was well received by all and will be incorporated in the development of video productions from this seasons footage for implementation and distribution next year. **Six small signs were also placed at strategic points along Grafton Beach** in April to address the growing problem of people driving on to the beach that was observed by patrollers and reported by hotels and residents; the response was generally positive and the incidents were noticeably reduced.

We **referred five - ten calls and e-mails a week from turtlewatching tourists to local, registered tour guides** and continued to encourage regular communication between patrollers and guides on and between beaches. Turtle tours ranged from \$30 - \$40 US per person and the four - six most active guides brought well over ten tourists per week to the beach during the peak months of May and June making at least \$300 -

*SOS Tobago Annual Report ©2007*

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago, Black Rock Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

(868) 357-2862

info@sos-tobago.org

www.sos-tobago.org

\$400 US per week through turtle tours, to date. To date, there is no standardized system for SOS benefiting in any way from direct tour guide referrals or from our overall role in the development of turtle watching in Tobago though one tour guide did make a donation to the group at the end of the season. Through our university volunteer programs, **we distributed well over fifty visitors between four small guesthouses in the Black Rock area and placed fifteen at one site in Charlotteville.** These groups stayed locally for periods of 1 – 8 weeks thus contributing meaningfully to the village economy during the normally slow tourist months of May, June and July. One of the challenges and opportunities for SOS in the coming year will certainly be how to generate greater financial self sustainability through these tourism related services and ventures possibly through a standardized international volunteer scheme or tour guide booking service; at the moment all referrals and bookings are done free of charge or commission.

## Incidents and Events Log

- In March, we were invited to send one representative to a Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Network (WIDECAST) and Earthwatch training session at Nature Seekers in Trinidad and passed the invitation on to Renardo Daniel who had just started at the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment (DNRE) as the warden responsible for wildlife issues in hopes of giving him and his department a better understanding of the challenges of turtle conservation locally and the efforts underway regionally. He found the event extremely inspiring and we are hopeful that there will be more productive, equitable collaborations with government in the future as a result.



- At the end of April we were blessed with the stranding of an injured olive ridley turtle in Lambeau; her shell was badly damaged and she couldn't dive for food so we tried our best to facilitate her rehabilitation in collaboration with

DNRE and local and foreign veterinarians. This once in a lifetime opportunity turned into an extremely time consuming and costly venture and unfortunately, 'Olive' as

*SOS Tobago Annual Report ©2007*

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago, Black Rock Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

(868) 357-2862

info@sos-tobago.org

www.sos-tobago.org

she came to be known was taken from her enclosure after three weeks before she had had a chance to fully heal and before there was any opportunity to introduce her to the public. The entire experience really brought home the inadequacies of the available systems and facilities for dealing with wildlife rehabilitation and management in Tobago and made us more determined than ever to be better prepared next time.

- In May, a poacher on Back Bay who had been in the act of clubbing a nesting leatherback assaulted Jason Ayres, one of our senior patrollers; thankfully no one was seriously hurt and the turtle also escaped. The matter was handed over to the police for investigation and greater caution was taken with Back Bay patrols where we continued to encounter suspicious characters from time to time. Patrollers in Charlotteville also encountered some intimidation from poachers in that area; however, these were mostly of an indirect nature with patrol shelters being deconstructed and so on. This mostly improved over time and was somewhat expected due to the high levels of poaching in these areas.



- At the end of June, we lost a hawksbill at the end of Turtle Beach. While there were occasionally rumours of other poaching incidents on our Index Beaches, this was the only event that we were able to confirm there, as the shell was still visible at the time of the report. Numerous poaching events were reported along the coast, particularly at Dead Bay, L'Anse Fourmi, Celery Bay, Cotton Bay, Hope Beach and in Speyside.



- Unfortunately, these last months of the season also saw an increase in entanglements (3 in one week-end in June!), most of which ended with the turtle being freed by passing fishermen. However, one

Report ©2007

Black Main Road, Black Rock, Tobago.

leatherback that washed up at Mt. Irvine public beach was the victim of an apparent drowning. She was untagged but had perhaps been in near shore waters preparing to come ashore that previous night when she became entangled. We buried her at sea with the permission of DNRE and the police due to the narrowness of the beach and the high level of human activity in the area.

- This season there continued to be a number of public activities that directly impacted on nesting beach habitat in negative and easily preventable ways. The Plymouth Jazz Festival illuminated the beach for ten days in April and throughout the season, the lights from the Plymouth point continued to be a problem. Efforts must be made before next season to shield the seaward facing side of these permanent lights and to make the Jazz Festival committee more aware of their impact so that some sort of mitigating measures can be worked out, even if only to have them fund extra patrollers for that period to deal with the higher incidence of disoriented turtles and overall beach traffic during that time. The Tobago Heritage Festival also sited it's Black Rock activities directly on the beach, not only illuminating the Black Rock river area for the greater part of a week but also erecting a stage directly on the sand. In light of past experience, this is inexcusable and greater effort must be made to have the turtles viewed as an important part of our sea heritage with equally important claims to the beach space. Ironically, a turtle nested in the day, in the middle of Heritage celebrations, SOS was luckily soon



on hand and was able to restore some level of crowd control, take the relevant tag numbers and give a brief lecture to the many children present. This incident will perhaps give us the perfect opening into starting discussions with the Black Rock Heritage committee.



- Throughout the season, we continued to participate in the development of Turtle Village Trust (TVT), a new umbrella organization spearheaded by the Trinidad turtle groups and SOS in Tobago. TVT has secured seed funding from bhp Biliton as well as additional funding from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and the Ministry of Tourism. The diverse board collectively has a wealth of experience in management, fundraising, tourism and business with a special technical committee providing scientific support. The focus is on developing turtle conservation nationally and eventually securing greater financial sustainability for the turtle organizations and their host communities through eco-tourism. It is a long term process that started three years ago and will start bearing fruit in the form of funding for training and public awareness materials within the communities by the end of 2007 and it will also free up much needed resources and energy to focus on addressing the issues of patrol or administrative funding.

