

## SOS Summary of Turtle Nesting Season 2004

At the end of the 2004 "turtle season", Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS) Tobago would like to take this opportunity to present some of the highlights of what has been a tremendously busy and successful season.

### **February – International Sea Turtle Conference**

The Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) AGM and International Sea Turtle Symposium was held in Costa Rica in February. Tobago was represented by Wendy Herron, President, SOS Tobago and Tanya Clovis, Vice President / Patrol Coordinator. For one week, we were surrounded by literally hundreds of amateur and professional turtle conservationists, not just from the Caribbean but from Africa, Japan, Southeast Asia, South and North America as well. There was widespread concern about the legal status of sea turtles in T+T as we are one of the only countries to have two different laws governing sea turtle conservation, both of which still allow for an open hunting season on all turtle species. However, we were particularly inspired by the many presentations on community based research and conservation projects from countries that with much smaller and less active turtle beaches than those in Tobago. It gave us a chance to discuss our concerns about tagging and other research methods not just with the scientists but with the community people actually involved and laid the groundwork for the development of a pilot tagging/research program for Tobago. We returned to Tobago on an overnight flight from Costa Rica just in time to meet with HRH Prince Andrew at the Environment TOBAGO/SOS/Travel Foundation offices. His visit, among other things, helped to commemorate the British High Commissions' support for the SOS Education Program.

### **March – Nesting Season Begins!**

With all that fanfare, the turtle nesting season started right in time with the close of hunting season on the first of March. This caught us all a little by surprise as turtles often don't start nesting regularly on our index beaches until April. Committed patrollers from previous years started coming back together and regular night patrols in the Black Rock/Grafton area began. To help make way for the nesting females, beach clean-ups were held with Environment Tobago on Grafton and Turtle Beach, these were supported by numerous volunteers and donations of refreshments from the beachfront hotels. Unfortunately, despite this positive start, one leatherback was unfortunately lost to poachers at the end of March on Turtle Beach, the initial swift response by SOS and the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment (DNRE) was stalled by a lack of cooperation on the part of the witnesses.

### **April – Turtle Watch Training!**

In April, patrols continued with additional support from the DNRE officers like Darren Henry and honorary game wardens like Bobby Andrews. We also had a very exciting visit from Dr. Scott Eckhart, the preeminent Leatherback biologist in this area and the scientific coordinator for WIDECAST. His visit came out of talks held in Costa Rica and he met with the Wildlife section of DNRE and SOS to discuss research options for Tobago. However, his main goal was to monitor leatherback's mating and most of his time was therefore spent offshore Charlotteville with the assistance of fishermen Ricardo and Heather Yeates who are also longstanding SOS volunteers from that community. The SOS Eco-tourism Program began with the support of the Travel Foundation. Turtle lectures resumed at the Turtle Beach hotel and discussions initiated with all the beachfront hotels in the Black Rock/Grafton area with regards to getting more turtle information into their guest information package. The Department of Tourism and the Tour Guide Association joined us in implementing the second free "Turtle Watch Training Course" for tour guides. The course had both theory and a practical components, it gave previous participants a chance to update their information and share their experience while the newcomers had a chance to find out what "Turtle Tours" are all about. Some participants took the opportunity to bring their families to the practical session on Turtle Beach and the turtles also obliged with one coming up within an hour of the groups arrival. April drew to a close with a visit from Sue Hurdle of the Travel Foundation along with a reporter from the London Times. This gave us an opportunity to discuss the progress of the eco-tourism program and sea turtle conservation in general. They sat in on one of Wendy Herron's turtle lectures and were presented with a copy of the tour guide training package in-room information leaflets. As a result of this visit, Tobago and the turtles were featured in a glowing report in the London Times shortly after their departure.

### **May – Education Programme**

Peaks Patrols continued on the index beaches in May with increased support from tour guides like Harris MacDonald (Jungle Tours), Michael Frank (Frankie) and Peter Cox, plying their trade while also maintaining a much needed presence on the beach. In May we had to free our first turtle from fishing boat lines and this was unfortunately the start of a trend. The Department of Fisheries and Marine Affairs assisted in a few instances but most often SOS collected donations from tourists at the turtle lectures to reimburse the fishermen who were mostly understanding once care was taken to involve them from the start and of course to secure their boat. Frankie, who is also a Reef Patrol Officer with Fisheries and Harris, who is also a lifeguard, were truly invaluable this year when it came to disentangling turtles at sea. The SOS Education Programme also got into full swing with the production of a Turtle Activity Book that was presented to students through an interactive lecture at each of the primary schools adjacent to turtle nesting beaches. Standard 5

students at schools in the immediate Black Rock area were also invited to patrol with the SOS team on Friday and Saturday nights during the months of May and June.

### **June – New Volunteers and New Turtles!**

June was by far the busiest month in terms of turtles nesting, a few hawksbills and greens also started to show up on the index beaches in greater numbers than had ever been recorded and leatherback hatchlings began to emerge from the earlier nests. With the school programme still a priority, all this activity, at night and in the day, was starting to put a real strain on our few volunteers. Luckily help arrived just in time with 6 international volunteers, marine biology students from the University of Glasgow in Scotland who arrived for a six week stay. Not only did they help to supplement SOS Tobago's understaffed beach patrol team but, perhaps more importantly, they helped to fill small guest houses that would have otherwise been empty in the relatively quiet tourist months of June to early July, further proving to the community that turtle conservation can be a lucrative source of income. Usually, as a result of the abundance of Harvest and Fisherman's festivals, more turtles are slaughtered in June than at any other time however with the extra help and increased community interest, this June was incident free, at least on the index beaches. The highlight of this month was definitely the discovery of tagged females among our regular nesting leatherbacks. All four ladies were sporting beautifully attached rear flipper tags which was a sign that they had probably been also 'pit tagged', that is, had a tiny microchip inserted in their shoulder with a unique code that could be read with a scanner. This was the first time that tagged turtles had been recorded in Tobago and as Tobago is not currently tagging turtles, it meant that they came from somewhere else. This was even more exciting because leatherbacks usually return to the beach area of their birth to nest and usually nest 7-10 times a season. This proved that some of our pregnant turtles were doing some long distance swimming between the islands between nests, exhausting just to think about! After some e-mailing around to the other groups, two of the turtles turned out to be tagged on Trinidad's north coast and the other two in Grenada.

### **July – Hatchlings Galore!**

The tagged turtles stuck around for most of July and their repeated appearances gave all the patrollers a chance to fine tune their tag reading skills and with tiny lettering on a piece of metal smaller than a bus ticket, this took some serious talent in the dark! Patrols continued in July and as turtle eggs take two months to hatch, the beaches were now regularly covered with emerging baby turtles trying to find their way to sea. The lights from the hotels and the Fishing Depot on Turtle Beach wreaked havoc with the hatchlings sense of direction and many hours were spent relocating the little ones to darker parts of the beach so that they could instinctively follow the natural moonlight to the sea rather than being drawn up to the bright lights from the buildings. In addition, the beach dogs quickly developed a taste for hatchlings and the rotten turtle eggs that are sometimes left behind in the nest and all hands were needed on the beach to keep them away from emerging nests. Unfortunately, our much-celebrated Hawksbill and Green turtle nests on Mt. Irvine Back Bay were subject to human destruction as egg poachers took their chances excavating nests in the day. July was also not that exciting for the turtles nesting further north, spot checks revealed numerous turtle carcasses and shells on beaches in Moriah, Castara and all the way up the coast.

### **August – Nesting Season Winds Down**

As we come to the end of the turtle season, it is time to bid farewell to the turtles and the volunteers who have started to go off in their separate directions, at least until next February. It is also time to tie up loose ends and finish projects, one particularly exciting one for us this season was the Travel Foundation Beachfront Hotel Sensitization Project that will come to a close this month with the unveiling of a long awaited, beautifully done sign on Turtle Beach. Finally, we would like to thank all of our supporters like the Travel Foundation, the British High Commission, Environment TOBAGO, the THA, Rex Turtle Beach Hotel, Plantation Beach Villas, the Tobago Tour Guide Association, the Plymouth Fishermen the Honourary Game Wardens and the numerous individual volunteers, local and international, who gave up their much needed night rest for all or part of the six months that made up this very long but very rewarding turtle nesting season 2004 – see you next year!