

Title: ACTIVITIES OF THE TURTLE AWARENESS AND PROTECTION STUDIES (TAPS) PROGRAM ON ROATAN, HONDURAS

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Sea turtles of the Caribbean are highly threatened. Turtle population decline in the region can be attributed to habitat degradation from coastal development, increasing marine pollution, removal of eggs and females from nesting beaches, and the capture of juveniles from foraging areas for human consumption. In Honduras, turtle populations are compromised by these and other wide-spread factors, yet levels of awareness regarding the plight and status of sea turtles among locals, visitors, researchers and the conservation community are surprisingly low. This, in part, may stem from a lack of published research coming from Honduras. The island of Roatan is one area of the country that especially facilitates initial opportunities for research, as well as engaging local communities and visitors in awareness of sea turtle in the waters of the Bay Islands. For this reason, we have initiated a series of local research and outreach efforts under the Protective Turtle Ecology Cooperative for Training, Outreach and Research (ProTECTOR)!

These initial efforts have been organized as the Turtle Awareness and Protection Studies (TAPS) program based on Roatan in the Bay Islands of Honduras. With cooperation from the local community of Oak Ridge, the Reef House Resort and Proyecto Manejo Ambientales de Isla de Bahia (PMAIB), the TAPS program commenced in February, 2006 with the study of 24 'reclaimed' sea turtles, of which 83% were juvenile hawksbill turtles, (*Eretmochelys imbricate*), and 17% were juvenile green turtles, (*Chelonia mydas*). Since commencement of the program, 58 turtles have been monitored for health and growth. Detailed measurements are among the data collected and stored in the TAPS Geographical Information System (GIS). The GIS designed to support the TAPS projects, is focused on the use of maps and globes to represent locations of turtles and track their migrations. It will also have the ability to compare location information with environmental parameters, such as sea surface temperature and current direction. Juvenile turtles are likely to stay 'local' for many years, with home ranges along the coasts of Roatan. Loma Linda University graduate student, Melissa Berube is currently tracking six juvenile hawksbills fitted with radio transmitters. The Turtle Adoption Program, established in June of 2006, helps to facilitate and build on turtle awareness efforts and provides a sustainable form of outreach beyond the immediate community. This program

offers opportunities for individuals to contribute to the TAPS research efforts in Honduras, affording one source of financial support that supplements national and international grant funding. Projects under development include mapping nesting beaches of Honduras, a long-term nesting beach monitoring program, long-term female tagging, satellite telemetry, determination of growth rates for wild-caught juveniles, and mapping historical versus current distributions. A top priority of the TAPS program is to provide scientific data that is currently lacking from an area where sea turtle research and conservation have not previously been national or international priorities.

Poster presentation.