

Project Update: April 2013

Antofagasta was recognised many years ago by the permanent presence of sea turtles in various sectors within and outside the Bay. Fishermen refer sites like Caleta Constitution, Isla Santa María, La Rinconada Marine Reserve, the fish market, the Historic Port, and Mejillones bay. In the latter, there is a warm water discharge from a thermoelectric power plant, where it is believed sea turtles get warm. However, fishermen tell about the presence of sea lions in the area which reduced the number of turtles, been hunted even in presence of people.

These days, fishermen report occasional encounters with sea turtles in some of the points before mentioned but with a lower frequency. Also, they talk about an apparent domestication of turtles: once they are sighted by fishermen, they remain on the sea surface. Then, turtles wait to be manipulated by the artisanal fisherman, especially if he is available to remove a crab fixed on sea turtle's cloaca. When they are released into the water after this surgery, tell the fishermen, turtles dive in a completely normal way. This opens a new outlook about the characteristics of the interaction sea turtle-crab, and how the intervention of the fishermen could be modifying aspects in both species.

We had made several census in the last 3 months; unfortunately we had no encounters with sea turtles, but it was a good exercise to get closer with a couple of artisanal fishermen in Antofagasta fishing terminal whose give up several indications about where the turtles could be and get them.

Environmental Education

Within the activities of the project, a first course on basic aspects in Biology and Marine Turtle Research was conducted at the School of Marine Resources of the University of Antofagasta. This course was attended by two researchers from the university and several students of marine ecology, and the support of the Rescue Centre and Environmental Education (CREA) of the University. This later department provided access to a male sea turtle to develop a practical session about measurement and identification techniques with course participants.

An identification guide was designed for be distributed between fishermen in the area, but also, between all researchers and students inside the University of Antofagasta, who periodically develop activities on the sea. Also, we designed an interview test, in order to the traditional knowledge about sea turtles and other species part of bycatch in the region, across interviews with some fishermen.

Logistics

Actually we count with all the technical equipment needed for the look for, tagging and measure sea turtles, by purchase or cooperation agreements with departments within and outside the University. Likewise agreements are being negotiated with different entities, to go with field trips and any other activities so as to increase monitoring time at sea within the area of interest".

