

## **Project Update: October 2010**

### **Objectives:**

- Individual approach: Personal talks with fisherman and poachers – Fully achieved

During the 2008 and 2009 turtle season, project staff and volunteers had frequent dialogue with fisherman and poachers involved in the extraction of turtle eggs.

- Turtle Festival – Not achieved

The yearly turtle festival takes place at the end of July and by the time the fund came in in 2008 it was too late to coordinate our participation with the Park Unit. Unfortunately due to the problems with the Park Unit related with the extraction of turtle hatchlings in 2008, no further cooperation with the Park Unit has been sought in 2009/2010.

- 1000 Community members and schoolchildren participated in workshops, meetings and events on environmental conservation and turtle protection – Fully achieved

Generally the meeting started with a short dialogue on the situation of turtles on our beaches. Then short presentations were given on marine turtles (see annex 1) after which we walked the beach explaining into detail the importance of turtle control on the beach. Each participant was given a plastic bag to recollect garbage on the beach to reduce the risk of waste to the female turtles.

- Community conservationists and 15 Local Tourist guides of the Posadas Ecoturísticas initiative received training on nature conservation and marine turtles – Fully achieved

Training on nature conservation and turtle protection has been given to community conservationists and local tourist guides as to improve knowledge on these issues, and provide information on practical responses and alternatives to stop nature degradation. The local tourist guides have turned into enthusiastic conservation promoters amongst their communities. After the training, the volunteers (Community conservationists and local tourist guides) have had interesting dialogue with their neighbours on the importance of biodiversity conservation and turtle protection in specific and became involved in the project awareness raising activities. Additionally the tourist guides include the gained knowledge to generate awareness amongst tourist on turtle protection and provide them with information on the small measures tourist can take during their stay in the Tayrona Park (no bonfires on the beach, garbage in waste bins etc). An additional workshop was given on the design and elaboration of turtles with natural products (stone and wood).

- Control activities Turtle Season – Partially achieved

During the 2008 turtle season, project staff with the support of the local tourist guides, university students and tourist volunteers patrolled the Castilletes beach, one of the beaches most visited by marine turtles in the Tayrona Park. No turtle control activities took place in 2009-2010.

- 3 Turtle nests protected during the 2008 turtle season – Fully achieved

In 2008 only 15 nests of marine turtles have been reported in the Tayrona Park, 3 of which at the Castilletes beach. Unfortunately only two of the 15 nests turtle's hatchlings were born. In total 232 turtles were born on the Castilletes beach. Every morning and afternoon the nests were revised. Plants approaching the nests were taken away, also the underground roots as they can damage the turtle eggs. A wooden fence was built around the nests to protect them from being stepped upon by tourists.

### **Difficulties:**

At the end of the 2008 Turtle season, after a huge effort of control activities, personal talks with fisherman and poachers, and nest protection, out of two nests turtles were born. Unfortunately, the

first turtles born at the beach that we controlled were taken away by the Park Unit and a local University for exhibition at an aquarium in Santa Marta.

Even though we started the project in close collaboration with the Park Unit, complementing each other's activities related to the protection of the marine turtles, this act, disturbed the relationship between the project members and the head staff of the Park Unit, and impeded future collaboration on turtle conservation, as we lost the belief in the goodwill of the Park Unit to the real protection of sea turtles.

We have learned from this unfortunate event that it is important to generate formal documents when collaborations with other institutions are started. Even though at the beginning of the project, a meeting with the Park Director took place and clear collaboration strategies were defined, unfortunately no formal document with the agreements was signed.

In 2009, control activities started in May at another private beach outside the Park borders, but due safety reasons these were stopped. And we only continued with the environmental education activities in the communities.

### **Outcomes so far:**

First of all, the training of the volunteers and the local tourism guides resulted in an amplified and better qualified group of local conservation promoters in the communities surrounding the Tayrona Park. Improving the knowledge of these promoters can be considered a long-lasting outcome of the project. This group of trained community conservationist is a benefit for future conservation projects of the Park Unit, the F.C.V and other organizations working in and nearby the Tayrona Park. In addition, the tourist guides benefit from the gained knowledge, being able to include information on nature conservation and turtle protection during their work as tourist guides, which in turn support the Park Unit in their intent to reduce environmental impacts of the tourist sector.

Secondly, the group of tourist guides, associated with the Posadas Ecoturísticas, a community tourism initiative, has embraced the turtle protection project. During the 2009 and 2010 turtle season they were actively involved in the awareness raising activities of the project. They organised together with the F.C.V, workshops in the communities and at the local schools around the Tayrona Park, and realised environmental walks to the turtle beaches for clean-up activities before the start of the turtle season. Their interest in continuing the community workshops on turtle protection by themselves is an interesting additional outcome.

Thirdly, awareness on the marine turtles and the vulnerability of their population has been increased, and turtle protection has been placed under the attention of community members and schoolchildren during the event, workshops and meetings realised by the project. During the dialogue the elder community members talked about the abundance of turtle nests in the past, important information for the younger generation, as nowadays the turtle nests on our beaches have decreased to less than 100 nests per year (In 2008 only 15 in the whole park). This has led to the important conclusion that turtle protection is necessary and that we have to stop the consumption of turtle eggs. Project staff, volunteers and tourist guides used this information during their individual talks with fisherman and poachers which has resulted in at least four of them, leaving poaching of turtle eggs, during the project lifetime. The volunteers will continue the dialogue with fisherman and poachers after the project and we hope that this outcome is sustainable in time.

**Community involvement:**

The project, from its design, involves local communities, supporting a bottom-up initiative of a group of “conservationists” whom on a voluntary basis wanted to contribute to the nature conservation in and around the Tayrona Park. The environmental education and awareness raising activities were based on a “community-community approach”.

The group of tourist guides, associated with the Posadas Ecoturísticas, have embraced the turtle protection project. They were initially only interested to participate in the training on nature conservation in return of beach control activities. They considered it important to improve their knowledge on nature conservation to become better tourist guides. But after the first training workshop they became involved in awareness raising activities as well, partly due to their conviction of the importance of turtle protection, partly as support to their community and especially schoolchildren, so as they say “the younger generation deserves a proper education on their natural environment”.

**Future plans:**

The group of tourist guides, associated with the Posadas Ecoturísticas, has embraced the turtle protection project as their flagship project. They want to expand the project to other species, including the Iguana, Macaw, Tamarin monkeys etc. They are interested in continuing the turtle project, and are in the process of getting funds.

Even though we have had problems with the Park Unit that have impeded further collaboration during this project, it would be good if the group of tourist guides of the Posadas Ecoturísticas, start a dialogue with the Park Unit, to see whether it is possible to institutionalise their effort on awareness raising on marine turtles amongst the community, as one of the activities financed by the Park Unit. Community member- Community member dialogue has proven to be very effective in nature conservation, and would be a good complement of the Park Units activities.

**Sharing & Promotion:**

I hope to share the results with other people working with Rufford funds, especially to generate awareness on the importance of “community – community approach” instead of “community – extensionists/environmental educator approach”.

In addition: all the project members, university volunteer and community volunteers, also those being sceptic in the beginning, became convinced of the effectivity of the “community- community approach” and will continue sharing this approach with others during future work opportunities.

**Timescale:**

The funds were used over a two-year time span (July 2008- August 2010) instead of the planned one year project duration. Due to safety reasons, the 2009 year activities had to be partially postponed to the 2010 turtle season.

**Comments:**

Unfortunately, declaring an area Natural Park does not directly lead to nature conservation. It offers the necessary legal status, but local interests of community members, official park unit, universities and other organizations are factors that can impede or embrace the real so needed nature conservation

action. During our project we experienced both; the Park Unit and local University that took away the turtle hatchlings for exhibition purposes at an aquarium in Santa Marta, and the support of the group of tourist guides in the implementation of the environmental education activities. Definitely: “Local people can make or break your nature conservation efforts”.



