

Turtle Spotter Program Abstract for ISTS 2008

CREATIVE NEW FUNDING SOURCE AIDS TURTLE CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITY PROJECTS IN TORTUGUERO, COSTA RICA

Authors

Emma Harrison¹
Roxana Silman¹
Eduardo Chamorro²
Enrique Obando³
Ana Sanchez⁴

Author affiliations

¹ Caribbean Conservation Corporation, Apdo Postal 246-2050, San Pedro, Costa Rica

² Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAЕ) – Tortuguero Conservation Area, Guapiles, Costa Rica

³ Turtle Spotter Program Committee – Tortuguero, Costa Rica

⁴ ProParques, Heredia, Costa Rica

Abstract

Since 2004, a new turtle tour system has been in operation in Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica. The ‘Turtle Spotter Program’ was implemented with the aim of reducing impacts of tourism on nesting sea turtles and improving the service offered to tourists. Both these objectives have been realized within three years but, since its inception, the Program has struggled with financial instabilities that have threatened its existence.

Initially, funding was sought via donations from the lodges and ‘cabinas’ in Tortuguero; the amount requested from each was proportional to its capacity. Unfortunately, this voluntary contribution system resulted in substantial non-payment, leading to the curtailment of Program activities in 2005 and 2006 due to lack of resources.

After the 2006 nesting season, the committee responsible for the Turtle Spotter Program, comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Environment and Energy, the Caribbean Conservation Corporation and the community of Tortuguero, determined that a more creative and reliable source of funding was urgently required for the Program to continue.

With assistance from the non-governmental organization ProParques, a novel scheme was devised to generate sustainable revenue for the Program. An information brochure was created for tourists to purchase, with each brochure containing a sticker that visitors would be encouraged to wear during their tour. The concept was to generate a sense of pride among tourists that they were supporting not only turtle conservation efforts, but also the community of Tortuguero. A price of \$4 for international tourists and \$2 for Costa Rican nationals was approved.

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Calculations of revenue potential, based on tourism figures from previous years, showed that brochure sales could cover all the Turtle Spotter Program running costs, with excess funds remaining. This additional money would be used to support health and education initiatives in Tortuguero.

In May 2007, Tortuguero hoteliers and tour operators were invited to a meeting where the new brochure was unveiled. There was unanimous support for the idea; support echoed by local tour guides in Tortuguero when they were presented with the proposal.

In the first two months of the project (July – August, 2007), 76% of tourists participating in turtle tours purchased a brochure, raising \$80,000; enough to pay the Program expenses for the entire season. All subsequent sales will generate money for community projects that will be selected by the Program committee and the Tortuguero Development Association. The undisputed success of the project, in such a short time period, far exceeds the committee's expectations and hopefully will ensure the continued development of the Turtle Spotter Program in coming years.

This new initiative offers a sustainable source of funding for the Turtle Spotter Program, with obvious benefits for nesting turtles. It also has the potential to greatly assist the wider community by supporting vital projects within the village. It is also hoped that additional merchandise, such as badges or t-shirts, will generate supplementary funds for the Program in the future. The authors believe this program could be implemented successfully at other turtle nesting beaches where guided turtle tours are conducted.