

**BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE AND THE NGÖBE-BUGLÉ COMARCA; REGIONALLY IMPORTANT AREAS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF LEATHERBACK TURTLES (*DERMOCHELYS CORLACEA*) ON THE CARIBBEAN COAST OF PANAMA\***

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In Bocas del Toro Province and the indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé Comarca, on the Caribbean coast of Panama, there exist feeding areas, migration routes and nesting beaches for four species of marine turtles: leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*). For hundreds of years, marine turtles have been an important resource for communities in Bocas del Toro Province. The sale of hawksbills and their shell has historically been a significant source of income for the local economy, while green turtles have predominantly been used for subsistence. During the early 1990s should be a colon, the commercialization of leatherback eggs also provided some revenue to local communities. Since 1989, however, several sea turtle research and conservation initiatives have been established in the province, in collaboration with local indigenous communities. Findings from these studies have subsequently revealed the global significance of the area for leatherback nesting populations. Chiriquí Beach, located within the Ngöbe-Buglé Comarca, is one of the most important leatherback nesting beaches in the world, with over 4,000 nests recorded each year. Through the expansion of monitoring activities within the province it is being observed that other nesting beaches in the province are also supporting significant numbers of leatherback females each year, including beaches within the San San Pond Sack Wetland - Sixaola Beach (350 nests), San San Beach (300 nests), Soropta Beach (360 nests), and Long Beach (150 nests) which is located within Bastimentos Island National Marine Park. This paper will discuss the importance of the nesting beaches within Bocas del Toro Province and the Ngöbe-Buglé Comarca with respect to leatherback turtles; it will provide details on the current status of the nesting population and trends observed at different nesting sites in the last five years. It will also highlight the principal threats to leatherbacks and their critical habitats in the region, and report on the success of on-going conservation programs.