

A Hawksbill Sea Turtle Wonderland

By: **Andy Bystrom** | September 18, 2009

<http://costaricanconservationnetwork.wordpress.com/>

A small population of 7 hawksbill sea turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) has been found in the waters surrounding Punta Coyote along the northern boarder of the Caletas-Arío National Wildlife Refuge, Costa Rica. Marine researchers from Pretoma have tagged all 7 with acoustic tracking devices and pumped out one of the animal's stomachs to study what these animals are eating and why they prefer this rocky point. The result: sea sponges.

Sponges are known to be highly toxic and lethal when eaten by other organisms because their silica (a principal content in glass) content. But hawksbills have evolved internal organs that are not affected by the tiny shards.



Punta Coyote and the hang-out for a newly discovered population of hawksbills (photo: Eric Lopez)

These small invertebrates grow on the shallow, rocky areas (5-12 meters deep) along Punta Coyote and provide the ideal feeding ground for the turtles. The most perplexing piece of this puzzle is that the small meta population of hawksbills has stayed in the same point since it's discovery 2 months ago. This behavior is different from other species of sea turtles that journey from beach to beach in search of food and breeding grounds.

The hawksbill's shell or carapace is a stunningly beautiful menagerie of different patterns and rich colors that flow together and drift apart. It's these colors that separate this sea turtle from all others and unfortunately single it out among poachers as a lucrative opportunity to butcher the animals shell into bracelets, rings, and necklaces. For this reason the hawksbill is nearing the brink of extinction and is rarely scene along Costa Rica's beaches, making this discovery of extreme importance for the conservation of this species.

With Costa Rica's Pacific coast littered with similar rocky points, protected inlets, and sponge habitat, it's probable that more individual groups of hawksbills have staked out their own small claims along Costa Rica's Pacific coastline.

For more information on how you can participate in sea turtle conservation programs, contact Randall Arauz at rarauz@pretoma.org or voluntarios@pretoma.org