

HONDURAS THIS WEEK

CONSERVATION New Conservation Initiative Launched to Help Eastern Pacific Hawksbills

A prominent group of investigators from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador and the U.S., all experts in biology, conservation and management of marine turtles, came together to share information on hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) living in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Called the "First Workshop of the Hawksbill Turtle in the Eastern Pacific," the gathering took place in Los Cóbanos, a natural protected area in El Salvador.

According to the 'Red List of Endangered Species' of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the hawksbill turtle is considered 'critically endangered.' Its status in the Eastern Pacific is particularly worrisome as recent observations suggest the species as being essentially extinct.

Evidence from various sources indicate that populations of hawksbill turtles in the Eastern Pacific have been reduced to a precious few of what they were in the past, the reduction having taken place prior to the start of the modern conservation movement.

During the workshop, experts pointed out the continued existence of various threats to hawksbills, including their capture and death during fishing activities, the harvesting of eggs, coastal development and the hunting by individuals for their shell, which is used to create handicrafts.

Nonetheless, during the workshop it was also shown that hope exists for the species in the Eastern Pacific. The experts shared information from their perspective areas and for the first time ever, generated a regional map displaying documentation of the species, including nesting reports, in-water observations and stranding areas. They also issued a resolution indicating the continued risks to hawksbill turtles in the Eastern Pacific and actions recommended be taken by local governments to guarantee the conservation of the species. To continue sharing information on hawksbills and strengthen regional policy for their conservation, a working group was formed called the "Eastern Pacific Hawksbill Initiative".

"Just ten years ago there wasn't enough information available to hold this meeting and we thought it might have been too late for hawksbill turtles in the Eastern Pacific," said Dr. Jeffrey Seminoff of the Southwest Fisheries Science Center of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration NOAA (U.S.). "This meeting is truly historical and has shown us that now more than ever we must work together for the conservation of the species," he added.

"The hawksbill turtle is highly migratory and requires regional efforts to ensure its survival," asserted Alexander Gaos of Pro Peninsula (U.S.), who was elected as regional representative for the Hawksbill Initiative during the workshop. "That is why we recently visited Bahía de Jiquilisco, and with the help of coastal community members, placed satellite transmitters on three nesting hawksbills in an effort to study their migratory movements and with the information generated, define better conservation and management strategies," Gaos explained.

"We must take urgent actions to recover this species, especially considering the new information discovered during the meeting, such as the strict protection of the hawksbill nesting habitat, the banning of consumption of their eggs and the implementation of effective technology to avoid their capture during fishing activities," declared Randall Arauz of Programa Restauración de Tortugas Marinas PRETOMA (Costa Rica).

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