

¡CAREY!

Where Have the Eastern Pacific Hawksbills Gone?!

Make a list of the world's most endangered sea turtle populations. Is the eastern Pacific hawksbill on it? If not, it's no surprise. Essentially nothing is known of the biology, distribution, abundance, or conservation needs of this enigmatic population. Until recently, virtually nothing had been done to study what remains of these animals in the eastern Pacific, hunted nearly into extinction long before the start of the modern sea turtle conservation movement.



In 2005, the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group recognized the lack of information about this population, listing it among global-scale “critical research and conservation needs.” According to communities and conservation projects in the region, some hawksbills do still remain in the eastern Pacific, but no one knows how many or if there are enough remaining to bring them back from the edge.

The Sea of Cortez, or Gulf of California, Mexico, has produced more recent sightings than anywhere in the eastern Pacific and is known to have hosted significant numbers of juvenile and adult

hawksbill turtles in the past—so much so that hawksbill fisheries once thrived in the coastal towns of La Paz and Loreto. Records in La Paz suggest that hawksbill turtle shell was an important component of the regional economy in the early 1900s. Fishermen from the region say that in the 1940s and 1950s the three-man crew of a single fishing canoe could capture five to seven hawksbills in one night.

Miguel del Barco, an 18th-century Jesuit missionary-naturalist who traveled the western coast of the Sea of Cortez, wrote of coastal indigenous people who caught hawksbills from their rafts



local name of the hawksbill, and similar to the common Spanish exclamation “¡caray!” used to express excitement or surprise.

In its first phase, as of January 2008, the investigators leading the project have begun interviewing local community members, establishing a sighting network, poring over historical archives, and monitoring the region’s coastal waters to begin to fill the information gaps, raise local awareness and solve the mysteries of the hawksbill population in the Sea of Cortez.

Of more than 20 coastal communities visited thus far, all have been highly supportive. Community members have reported recent hawksbill sightings to ¡CAREY! staff on more than a dozen occasions already—observations that often previously went undocumented or were recorded but subsequently lost.

Boding well for the turtles, more hawksbills are being reported now than were reported several decades ago—a result of the increased protection afforded to sea turtles in the early 1990s, many local fishers believe. As explained by Juan de la Cruz, a former turtle hunter from a small fishing village just south of Loreto, “Thirty years ago it was almost impossible to see a hawksbill, because hunting of the species was rampant. Once the laws were established, the market for penca [tortoiseshell] died, and seeking hawksbills became too risky. If people wanted to eat turtle meat, they trapped other turtles that were easier to capture.”

In addition to generating data and calling local and international attention to this fragile population, future plans of the initiative include evaluating hawksbill populations in other areas of the eastern Pacific by replicating the efforts undertaken in the Sea of Cortez and for establishing a region-wide hawksbill information and sighting network.

Many questions remain, but the mysteries of this forgotten population are beginning to reveal themselves. By shedding light on the biology and conservation status of the eastern

Pacific hawksbill, ¡CAREY! will provide critical information for local and regional conservation management plans that will ultimately determine the feasibility of the turtles’ recovery in this region of the world—hopefully transforming their vanishing act into a comeback.

Alexander Gaos and Ingrid Yañez, a husband and wife team, are conservation scientists spearheading the Eastern Pacific Hawksbill Initiative with the Grupo Tortuguero. Wallace J. Nichols (wallacejnichols.org) is a senior scientist at Ocean Conservancy and research associate at California Academy of Sciences.

Hawksbills once commonly inhabited the waters of the Sea of Cortez but today could be in threat of local extinction. The Eastern Pacific Hawksbill Initiative is now carefully investigating just how endangered that sea turtle population is. © STEVE JONES / WWW.MILLIONFISH.COM



This hawksbill was captured in September 2007 at Isla Pardito, a small island north of La Paz in the Sea of Cortez. Local fisherman Gilberto Cuevas (shown) and staff at the organization Niparaja are some of the first participants to report hawksbills to the ¡CAREY! network. Several hawksbill sightings have already been recorded at Isla Pardito. © JUAN SALVADOR ACEVES

and canoes, saying, “[They] have the additional profit of the shell which, when there is someone to buy it, they sell. From this carey, they make [in Guadalajara] little boxes for snuff, cigarettes, and other various small things.”

Three hundred years later, the Eastern Pacific Hawksbill Initiative is beginning its work, village by village, in search of the lost hawksbills of the Sea of Cortez. Conducted in collaboration with the Grupo Tortuguero, a grassroots conservation organization with 500 individual partners in communities along the coast of northwestern Mexico, the initiative is referred to as “¡CAREY!”—the