

PROGRESS REPORT

Community-based conservation program of river turtles
by indigenous Peruvian and Colombian communities
of the Amazon River (2009-2010)



Species involved: giant South American turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*), yellow spotted river turtle (*P. unifilis*) and six tubercled river turtle (*P. sextuberculata*).

Project location: Colombian and Peruvian indigenous communities of the Amazon River.

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Period covered: From June 15th, 2009 to 1st October 2009.



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Education for Nature Program



Abstract

Field phase started in June 2009, with organizing and training of two local conservation groups from Colombian indigenous communities. These and a local indigenous association were in charge of protecting a community conservation beach during the whole turtle nesting season, from July to September. Monitors gathered biological data on the nests and erased tracks so that nest poachers could not find them during the day. Monitoring and socialization among neighbor communities discouraged hunters from visiting the beach during night hours, thus avoiding nesting females from being captured. 28 nests of the three species were found. Four nests were poached by humans during the day hours, which was a great improvement from last year, when almost 50% of the nests were lost due to poaching. Conservation groups will continue to monitor the nests until all hatchlings arrive safely to the River in November, when this phase of the program will conclude.

Overall objectives of the program

1. To reduce nests poaching and adults hunting in a community conservation beach through constant protection and monitoring by local conservation groups, with effective collaboration and support by environmental authorities from both countries.
2. To provide tools and training to four groups of young leaders in conservation, one in each participating community, and to Curuinsi Huasi association, aiming to stimulate conservation as a productive alternative in the area.
3. To carry out an educational campaign to rise awareness and recall tradition regarding turtle conservation in participating and neighbor communities.
4. To strengthen conservation efforts on the natural beach by nest translocation from non-protected beaches, aiming to increase egg survival rate.
5. To promote and teach local conservation groups to design, raise funds, and execute conservation projects

Progress and perspectives on overall objectives

Organization and training of local conservation groups

Field phase started in June 2009. Several meetings were carried out with each of the four participating communities, in order to discuss and set up the activities to carry out during the 2009 nesting season (July to November). In each community, awareness-raising posters were placed in visible locations to suggest their commitment to turtle conservation (see appendix 1). These meetings started with a short workshop with the whole community to make them think why preserving the turtles was important for them. Next, a preliminary list of volunteers for the conservation groups was written. These groups received training in conservation beach monitoring, data gathering, employment of equipment and nest translocation. In the two Colombian communities, Nuevo Jardin and El Progreso, two groups of 12 to 15 volunteers, men and women of different ages, were formed. Afterwards, an official meeting with the definitive group members was held with the supervision of the regional environmental authority (Corpoamazonia); an agreement was signed with the group coordinators and the traditional indigenous authorities of each community. The agreement stated that the program would provide transportation, snacks, materials (flashlights, equipment, communication devices, etc.) and training to the conservation groups, and that the groups would survey and monitor each

night a beach located in a small, inhabited island in the Amazon River, to protect the nests and nesting females until hatchlings arrive safely to the river. Also, that at the end of the season, each group would be awarded for their conservation efforts with a small engine, so they could have self-mobility for next year's activities.

Training of the conservation groups included practical guidance in the community and in-field supervision on the beach. The groups learnt how to fill data formats and label the nests, taking coordinates on the GPS and erasing tracks. Curuinsi Huasi Indigenous Association contributed greatly to training of groups, using experience gained during last year's monitoring. Finally, we practiced and explained the protocol for nest translocation that will be used in the next year's nesting season (see below).

Unfortunately, although the two Peruvian communities showed a great interest since last year, few volunteers actually signed in to participate in the activities. However, they were willing to contribute by not poaching eggs from the conservation beach and by notifying neighbor communities about the conservation program being held there.

We expect that after the awareness-raising activities planned for the first semester 2010, interest and commitment for conservation will also grow in the Peruvian communities and that community groups will be formed and be ready to participate in next season's activities.

Monitoring and protection of a community conservation beach

On the 24th of July monitoring of the conservation beach started. Each night, a group of at least five volunteers surveyed the beach to protect the nests and nesting females from hunters and poachers. When monitors found a nest, they gathered data such as species name, date, location, width of tracks, GPS coordinates and other relevant information, and labeled the nests with a unique number. Tracks were erased to avoid nest poachers from finding them during daytime.

Turtles started to nest on the 28th of July, almost 15 days later than last year. The last nesting turtle, the only *P. expansa* of the whole season, nested on the 15th September. To date, a total of 28 nests of the three species were recorded. The main achievement of this season, compared to last year's, was that people were not wandering around the beach at night anymore. In fact, during the last season, almost 50% of the nests were poached, most of them during the night while volunteers were keeping the beach. This also help to prevent females from being captured during nesting. This achievement is perhaps a combination of different factors: involvement and cooperation of the two Peruvian communities that will participate next year; socialization activities among neighbor communities and further support of environmental authorities (see below); and presence of at least five monitors on the beach, compared to two or three from last year.

Despite the efforts of the monitors to erase the tracks, four nests were extracted by humans during the day, most of them probably found accidentally. Nevertheless, proper and thoughtful wiping out of the tracks proved to be an effective method for nest protection during non-guarded hours, and its human cost is considerably less than guarding the beach 24 hours.

Conservation groups will continue to monitor the nests until all hatchlings arrive safely to the river, around mid-November, when this phase of the program will conclude.

Socialization of the activities with neighbor communities

In August, a meeting was held with military and civilian authorities of Peru and Colombia. The purpose was to present to the authorities the conservation actions the groups were carrying out, and to discuss about how they could support them. As a result, a special turtle conservation event was planned, in which authorities and communities from both countries participated. The 5th of September the event took place. Five communities, including Nazareth and Arara, the largest in the area, and five institutions from Colombia participated in the event, in which the local conservation groups were the hosts. Unfortunately authorities and communities from Peru could not participate due to logistics, although they expressed their support and their regret for not attending. During the event, authorities carried out educational activities related to environmental legislation and importance of turtle conservation, oriented to both attending adults and children. Local conservation groups explained to the other communities about their work and their results so far, and invited them to contribute and support their conservation efforts. A brochure that explained the conservation activities of the groups was prepared and distributed during the event (see appendix). Attending communities responded positively and showed their interest and their support to the groups, and showed their will to participate with conservation groups on their own in the future.

Next year, a similar activity will be planned in the Peruvian side of the River, hosted by the participating communities of Peru, and hopefully with more attendance of communities and authorities from both countries.

Nests translocation

The original idea was to translocate nests from non-protected beaches to an artificial beach. However, we realized several drawbacks about this idea. First, a similar project in Puerto Nariño, 40 km from our location, has reported high eggs loss due to ants and crickets, possibly due to the effect of grouping many nests in a small area. Second, we realized that a community conservation beach located between the two countries, and that did not belong to any community was a much stronger awareness-raising symbol than an artificial beach located inside a community (which of the four communities would we choose?). Therefore, we requested a research permit to Corpoamazonia, the Colombian environmental authority, to translocate nests from non-protected beaches to the conservation beach. The groups received training and practice on the nest translocation protocol. Although the permit was conceded, in the last minute Corpoamazonia realized that the conservation beach was located in the Peruvian side of the river, just across the imaginary country border, and therefore the permit could not be granted. We decided to put on hold the permit for next year and to request another permit with the Peruvian environmental authority, since two Peruvian communities will be involved. This procedure will probably take longer than with the Colombian authority, so we will start it as soon as possible to have the permit ready for the beginning of next nesting season.

Activities planned for next phase

Current phase will conclude in mid-November with the termination of the nesting season. A celebration event will be carried out with the conservation groups and their communities, and the communities of Peru that will be participating next year will also be invited. A small engine will be given to each group as reward for their conservation activities.

For the next phase, the following activities are planned:

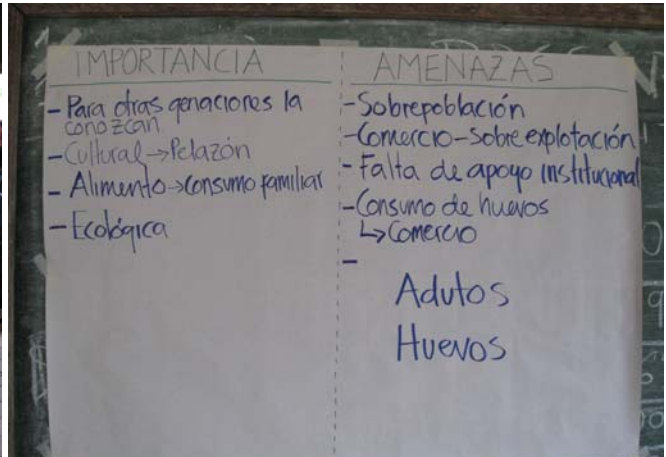
- The Peruvian environmental authority will be contacted to start the application procedure for a research permit.
- During the first semester of 2010, a special awareness-raising campaign will be carried out with the two Peruvian communities, so that they form conservation groups and get involved in the next season's activities. We will continue to carry out awareness-raising activities with the Colombian communities.
- Prior to the start of the nesting season, the four conservation groups and the Curuinsi Huasi association will participate in capacity-building workshops. The idea is that they will receive proper theoretical and practical training in different areas, such as: turtle biology and conservation; monitoring of nests and nesting females; gathering and analyzing data; sustainable management of natural populations; organization capacity; and project planning, fund-raising and execution.
- A gathering will be held between the four conservation groups and a conservation group that carries out turtle conservation activities in Puerto Nariño, to exchange knowledge and experiences and present their main results.
- Also prior to the nesting season, groups will be in charge of visiting neighbor communities to carry out awareness-raising activities, to socialize their conservation actions and to ask for their support by not extracting eggs or females from the beach. This will include the turtle conservation event with authorities and communities of both countries, this time with the Peruvian communities as hosts.
- The four groups and the Curuinsi Huasi association will be in charge of monitoring and protecting the community conservation beach. This will be done in such way that Colombian groups will be able to transmit the acquired experience to the newly formed Peruvian groups.
- At the end of the season, groups will be stimulated to propose conservation actions to carry out in 2011.

Problems and constraints

The main difficulty was related to some communities that have been invited to participate or to support the program since last year but have been reluctant. One neighbor community in particular, Santa Sofia, has been trying to create difficulties for the development of the program. They refused to participate in the program and to support the work of the conservation groups, and they tried to obstruct the turtle conservation event held by the authorities. They even presented a letter of complain to the authorities about the presence of the Biodiversa Foundation and about the program (without any clear arguments). Since we know the importance of having the support and acknowledgement to the groups' conservation activities by neighbor communities, both Biodiversa and the participating communities have tried in different occasions to approach them, so they can present personally their concerns and we can arrive to an agreement. Unfortunately, so far they have not attended to our invitations, nor did they participate in the turtle conservation event. It is important to notice that this community had the highest number of egg confiscations by environmental authorities during last year. We can only persist in trying to dialogue with them and make them understand the importance of what the groups are doing for the benefit of a resource that is common to all communities and not for particular interests. Hopefully the positive influence of the participating communities and their enthusiasm for conservation will soon permeate to this and to other reluctant communities.

PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

Workshops with local conservation groups



Initial workshops held in El Progreso, Colombia, and Yahuma II, Peru. The list shows why communities thought turtle conservation was important: for future generations, for cultural reasons, as food source, and for ecological reasons.

FUNDACIÓN

Monitoring and protection of a community conservation beach



Local conservation groups spent the night at the beach protecting nesting adults and learning to gather relevant biologic information.

Socialization activities supported by civilian and military authorities



Meeting with Peruvian and Colombian authorities and turtle conservation event organized by Colombian authorities

Local conservation groups present their work to attending communities.



APPENDIX

PRINTED MATERIALS

Two different printed materials were produced. The first was a poster oriented to the participating communities to suggest their commitment to turtle conservation. It says:

"If we don't protect them, this will be the only way our children will get to know them"

"Help us taking care of them! (in Spanish and in Tikuna)"

"Nuevo Jardín, El Progreso and Yahuma I y II Zona committed to river turtle conservation".



The second was a brochure oriented and distributed among non-participating neighbor communities. It explained about the conservation actions that the groups were carrying out. It had four sections:

Why are we protecting the river turtles?

How are we protecting them?

Who are supporting us?

How can you help protecting the river turtles?

¿Quiénes nos están apoyando?



La Fundación BioDiversa Colombia nos está enseñando cómo cuidar las playas para que las tortugas puedan subir a poner sus huevos y cómo tomar la información que necesitamos. También nos está capacitando en la importancia de la conservación, cómo manejar nuestros recursos naturales sosteniblemente y cómo plantear nuestros propios proyectos para hacerlo. También contamos con el aval de Corpoamazonia y el apoyo de distintas autoridades de Perú y de Colombia, como la Marina de guerra del Perú, la Policía Nacional del Perú, la Policía Ambiental, Guardacostas, la Brigada de Selva XXVI, la Capitanía de puerto, Senasa y las autoridades civiles de Santa Rosa, y esperamos que muchas más autoridades y comunidades se unan a nuestro esfuerzo de conservación.



¿Cómo puedes ayudar a proteger a las taricayas, a los cupisos y a las charapas?

1. Participa y colabora con los programas de conservación: si tú o tu comunidad están interesados en aprender a cuidar este recurso, pueden ayudarnos en nuestras actividades o conformar su propio grupo de conservación.
2. No las captures en la época de reproducción: no cojas ni molestes a las hembras que suben a las playas a poner sus huevos.
3. Protege los nidos: si encuentras un nido, no saques los huevos. Mejor borra los rastros para evitar que otras personas los encuentren.
4. Protege las playas de anidación: evita transitar o hacer fogatas en las playas de anidación durante la temporada reproductiva. No permitas que tus animales domésticos perturben a las hembras cuando estén anidando ni que se coman sus huevos. Evita transitar en embarcaciones con motor cerca de las playas en la noche.
5. Déjalas en su hábitat natural: si accidentalmente atrapas una tortuga, suéltala en el mismo lugar donde la capturaste y no la llesves como mascota.
6. No contamines su hábitat natural: no arrojes basura (plásticos, botellas, icopor) al río ni a las playas, pues las tortugas y otros animales pueden confundirlas con alimento y morir asfixiados.
7. No vendas ni compres tortugas o huevos: el comercio de tortugas y de huevos es ilegal en Colombia y en Perú, y puede acarrear hasta siete años de cárcel y una multa de hasta 300 salarios mínimos legales mensuales vigentes (Artículo 242 Ley No 141 de 1999 de Colombia). Denuncia ante las autoridades ambientales cualquier caso de comercio ilegal.

Programa de conservación comunitaria de charapas, cupisos y taricayas con comunidades indígenas amazónicas de Colombia y Perú

Comunidades de Nuevo Jardín y El Progreso
Asociación Curuinsi Huasi
Comunidades de Yahuma I y II zona



Para que nuestros hijos y nuestros nietos puedan conocerlas
¡Ayúdenos a cuidarlas!



¿Por qué cuidamos a las taricayas, a los cupisos y a las charapas?

Antiguamente subían muchas madres a poner en las playas del Amazonas durante la época reproductiva. Los abuelos las cuidaban para no se acabaran y pudieran aprovecharlas de manera sostenible. Sin embargo, las playas dejaron de cuidarse y la gente comenzó a cazarlas y a sacar todos los nidos para comerlos y para venderlos. En la actualidad, ya suben muy pocas madres a poner en las playas y las pocas que suben las estamos capturando y llevándonos sus huevos. Es por esto que las taricayas, los cupisos y las charapas se están acabando y nuestros hijos y nuestros nietos no van a poder conocerlas.



¿Cómo estamos cuidándolas?

Las comunidades de Nuevo Jardín y El Progreso y la Asociación Curuinsi Huasi, preocupadas por la escasez de estas especies, conformamos grupos de conservación para ayudar a protegerlas. Desde el año pasado, estamos cuidando la playa de conservación comunitaria "Tori" en la isla del medio detrás de la Isla de los Micos, para poder preservar una parte del recurso y que las tortugas puedan seguir reproduciéndose.



Todas las noches, un equipo de cada comunidad viaja a la playa "Tori" para cuidar a las madres que suben a poner y evitar que se pierdan los huevos.



También estamos recogiendo información que nos permitirá saber cuántas tortugas suben a la playa y si las poblaciones están aumentando o disminuyendo. Las comunidades de Yahuma I y II zona también están conformando sus grupos para poder ayudarnos en la próxima temporada reproductiva.

