Engaging Local Communities in Sea Turtle Conservation: Strategies from Nicaragua

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SEA TURTLES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD'S OCEANS ARE ENDANGERED, and species such as the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) turtles of the eastern Pacific are nearing extinction (Sarti-Martínez et al. 2007; Chaloupka et al. 2004). In response to this crisis, governments, communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are forming new partnerships to increase protection for sea turtles. Such alliances can provide valuable lessons for involving local communities in conservation.

This paper seeks to share the strategies and approaches applied by the organization Paso Pacífico to partner with local communities in sea turtle protection. Paso Pacífico is a non-profit organization founded in 2005, and is focused on restoring and protecting the endangered ecosystems along the Pacific slope of Central America. The program activities of our relatively young organization aim to conserve ecosystem processes operating at a landscape scale. Thus, we pair forest conservation efforts with complementary actions in the coastal and nearshore marine environments. Paso Pacifico currently focuses its conservation efforts on southewestern Nicaragua, where we are developing the Paso del Istmo Biological Corridor, a series of private protected areas connected through sustainably managed landscapes.

Sea turtles in the Nicaraguan social context

Sea turtles are an important target for Paso Pacifico's conservation efforts. Four different species nest along Pacific beaches of southern Nicaragua: the olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivaceae*), hawksbill, leatherback, and Pacific green (*Chelonia mydas*). Despite its global importance as a locale for sea turtle reproduction, sea turtle nest poaching is widespread. At unprotected beaches, nearly 100% of nests located are lost. Local people and fishermen track the beaches at night for nesting turtles, and upon finding a nest, they immediately harvest all the eggs. Although there is variation among species, one sea turtle nest may provide up to ten dozen turtle eggs. Poachers sell captured sea turtle eggs to middlemen who take the eggs to urban centers where they are sold at public markets and restaurants throughout Nicaragua. Local people who initially sell the eggs receive US\$1.50–3.00 per dozen eggs.

The sea turtle egg trade in Nicaragua is influenced by the pervasiveness of rural poverty and the culture of turtle eggs as food. Nicaragua has the smallest economy in Latin America and the second lowest gross domestic product (IMF 2009). Poverty is most prevelant in rural areas, including along the coast (PNUD 2000). Local people turn to the sea turtle egg trade as a way to supplement their small cash incomes from subsistence farming and artisanal fishing. Nicaraguans have long consumed sea turtle eggs. It is believed that sea turtle eggs were an important food source for pre-Columbian settlements in coastal areas. During the Contra War of the 1980s, the scarcity of food and protein led to an increase in the sale and consumption of turtle eggs throughout the country (González-Pérez, pers. comm.). Today, Nicaraguan people express a preference for the flavor of sea turtle eggs and a belief that they have a superior nutritional value over chicken eggs.

Community-based approaches

Paso Pacífico's community-based approaches are not entirely new in the conservation of sea turtles. Approaches that seek to maximize community involvement are common throughout the world, and include activities such as comanaged protected areas, community-guided ecotours, and community-led biological monitoring (refer to www.seaturtle.org for a global listing of projects). Critics point out that there has been very little rigorous testing of the effectiveness of community-based approaches, yet given the limited funding and the need for rural economic development throughout the tropics, many conservation organizations see community-based approaches as a possible win–win (Barrett et al. 2001). Recent research on community-based programs in Palau and other Pacific Islands demonstrate that these approaches can be effective, particularly when they have a bottom-up approach that is collaborative with NGOs and scientific institutions, and are adaptive to the local conditions (Johannes 2002; Risien and Tilt 2008). The Paso Pacífico program attempts to play the role of facilitator by which community members may step up and eventually lead the effort to protect their resources.

Project location

La Flor Wildlife Refuge is a protected area located in southwestern Nicaragua. It was established to safeguard one of the region's most important *arribada* (mass nesting) beaches for the olive Ridley sea turtle. Rangers from MARENA, Nicaragua's Ministry of Environment, patrol the beach at La Flor, with support from the Nicaraguan army. Similar to most other protected areas in Nicaragua, the terrestrial area of the reserve is under private ownership, while the core area is administered by MARENA. Protective activities and patrols by the MARENA park rangers are limited to a single beach where the olive Ridley *arribadas* ocur. According to MARENA, limited funding and a low number of personnel make it impossible to patrol beaches beyond the La Flor *arribada* beach. Although the olive Ridley is the primary species nesting at La Flor, critically endangered hawksbill, leatherback, and Pacific green turtles nests solitarily along the isolated southern beaches at La Flor (Figure 1).

The Paso Pacífico turtle conservation program is located at two remote beaches within La Flor Wildlife Refuge. The program is carried out in partnership with community members from La Tortuga and Ostional, which are settlements of the San Juan del Sur Munici-



Figure 1 Location map for La Flor Wildlife Refuge and communities of La Tortuga and Ostional, San Juan del Sur, Rivas Province, Nicaragua. Community rangers protect sea turtles at beaches located between Punta La Flor and Punta Arranca Barba. The La Flor *arribada* beach is protected by MARENA government rangers.

pality in the Rivas Province of Nicaragua. While the beaches involved in this project are part of La Flor Wildlife Refuge, they are not sites of olive Ridley *arribada* nesting events, nor do they receive protection from government rangers. The beaches protected through this community-based program are located between Punta La Flor and Punta Arranca Barba, near the Ostional community (Figure 1).

It is important to note that southwestern Nicaragua is undergoing economic change due to a growing tourism industry and investment in coastal properties for hotel and housing developments. This pressure extends to properties near Ostional and La Flor Wildlife Refuge. The potential for an increase in tourism represents a threat to, and an opportunity for, both local communities and the improved management of endangered sea turtles.

Project goals

The long-term goal of the Paso Pacífico sea turtle conservation program is to protect endangered sea turtles in partnership with local communities. The specific objectives are to (1) reduce conflict between communities and natural resource managers near La Flor Wildlife Refuge, (2) decrease poaching and increase protection for solitary nesting sea turtles, and

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(3) promote alternative sources of income that are tied to conservation for the benefit of local people.

In late 2006, Paso Pacífico first set out to identify the threats and problems affecting sea turtle conservaton near La Flor Wildlife Refuge. Paso Pacífico staff carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with over fifty community members from La Tortuga and Ostional communities. These interviews were done with adult farmers, fishermen, and women, and included questions regarding the perceived threats to sea turtles, the value of coastal conservation, and the level of interest in tourism. In addition to the one-on-one interviews, Paso Pacífico held two community-wide meetings where a list of obstacles to sea turtle conservation were developed by community members and a discussion of their root causes ensued. One of the major results of this diagnostic study was the finding that local communities are interested in supporting sea turtle conservation and see the potential for tourism. Community members expressed anger at not being trusted to protect sea turtles and also a feeling of resentment that they are being excluded from the economic benefits they believe come from tourism at La Flor Wildlife Refuge. They view the turtle poaching problem as one carried out by a small minority of community members who are in economic need or who are considered unwilling to participate in more labor-intensive agriculture and fishing.

Strategies

Paso Pacífico developed a series of strategies to respond to the needs identified by the local communities (Table 1). We provide a description of each of the strategies being employed. The programs here have been supported through funding from the USAID (US Agency for International Development) project Sustainable Tourism in Critical Watersheds, the US Forest Service International Institute for Tropical Forestry, Project AWARE Foundation, the State of the World's Sea Turtles Project, the Turner Foundation, private donors, and an anonymous foundation.

Mediate conflict There is a substantial history of turtle egg poaching in the communities surrounding La Flor Wildlife Refuge and adjacent beaches. Turtle eggs removed from local beaches are not primarily consumed within the local community, but are sold to middlemen who bring the eggs to larger markets. The sale of turtle eggs represents a valued revenue stream in the Ostional and La Tortuga communities, particularly during the rainy season (June through November) when artisanal fisheries are down. Local people are prohibited by MARENA officials from entering La Flor Wildlife Refuge, and thus are denied access to harvest eggs on the main La Flor *arribada* beach. This has created resentment within the community because local people believe that the rangers and army are finding ways to enrich themselves—for example, by collecting entrance fees at the park. Local people feel that they are excluded from the benefits of tourism. Also, a considerable amount of tension is created because soldiers from the Nicaraguan army who support MARENA rangers are armed with guns. In the past, the guns have been fired by the army against poachers from local communities, and there have been serious injuries.

Problem/Need	Strategies
Community in conflict surrounding turtle conservation, particularly with government resource managers at La Flor	Mediating conflicts and establishing new partnerships and alliances with community groups and leaders
Zero protection of nesting turtles; lack of scientific data on populations of sea turtles	Training and equipping local people to protect beaches, using science-based methods to monitor nesting beaches and turtles
Pervasive rural poverty (illegal turtle egg market is source of cash income to local people)	Provide performance-based incentives for sea turtle conservation, spread economic benefits throughout community
Growing tourism industry; local communities marginalized from tourism benefits	Prepare community memberse to receive tourists, support establishing community- based tourism micro-businesses

 Table 1
 Outline of problems and needs identified by community members and the strategies developed by Paso Pacífico to respond.

In 2007, Paso Pacífico hired an expert in conflict mediation who held interviews and one-on-one meetings with community leaders and governmental agencies (the municipality, MARENA, army, and local police). These meetings were followed by a series of community workshops, resulting in an agreed-upon framework for cooperating in the name of conservation and sustainable tourism development. Paso Pacífico also held activities throughout the year to increase trust and cooperation among stakeholders. These efforts included meetings with tourism investors and developers, a workshop with developers promoting turtle-friendly lighting, a field trip with local schoolchildren to La Flor Wildlife Refuge to view nesting sea turtles, and a sea turtle educational exhibit at a local school. These activities were designed to raise community awareness regarding the importance of sea turtles while also opening the dialogue between the different stakeholders who have been at conflict.

Monitor and protect solitary nesting turtles In early 2008, Paso Pacífico held a community meeting in La Tortuga and Ostional. There, we presented our goals for sea turtle conservation and our interest in seeing the local communities directly benefit from ecotourism. We announced a request for applications in February 2008 to fill community ranger positions. There were over ten applicants, and community leaders together with Paso Pacífico staff formed a committee to review the applications. Six rangers were hired at a competitive wage with benefits to work as full-time rangers to protect the beach. This was the first time any of these men had formal employment and four of them were formerly turtle egg poachers.

In March 2008, the lead author (a Paso Pacífico Board member and retired US National Park Service ranger) visited the newly hired rangers to teach an intensive course. The workshop focused on the roles and responsibilities of a ranger and the global network of rangers creating "the thin green" line to protect thousands of endangered animals and places. Government rangers from the MARENA station at La Flor Wildlife Reserve and members of the Nicaraguan army also participated in the course. Rangers received biological monitoring training from conservation scientist Cynthia Lageaux of the Wildlife Conservation Society, and two rangers were able to travel to Lageaux's project site on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast to practice methods of tagging turtles. (Rangers can successfully excavate nests to count hatchling success, transfer nests that are poorly located, and record nesting behavior of four turtle species.) Training has continued and other workshops have included an international protected areas management course conducted by the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE), a first aid course, and training in ranger preparedness and visitor services. Rangers have been equipped with radios and professional outdoor equipment, including new uniforms. Rangers will also soon benefit from portable solar electric lights engineered by a team of American architects at the Portable Light Project. The lights are adapted to provide the red light conditions required for monitoring turtles.

Paso Pacifico community rangers work round the clock protecting two pristine and isolated beaches (Figure 2). Rangers are trained to use non-confrontational approaches to ask that egg poachers cease poaching on the beaches, and thus far this approach has been successful. This may be because rangers are all known friends and relatives of local poachers. The community rangers play a central role in protecting extremely rare sea turtle species, including the hawksbill, leatherback, and Pacific green. Over the past year we have found that these beaches are particularly important nesting sites for Pacific green sea turtles (we have protected over 40 nests in the past six months, while there were fewer than 10 nests reported for all of western Nicaragua in 2007). These beaches also have the highest counts of nesting hawksbills reported for the Pacific of Nicaragua. The presence of hawksbill and leatherback nests is particularly noteworthy given the critical status of these species. Without the protective actions of community rangers, it is certain that nests at these beaches would be poached.

Rangers express great satisfaction in applying their knowledge about nesting behavior to now protect these animals rather than harm them. The rangers see that by participating in conservation they can provide a steady income for their families and can assume positions of leadership within their communities. The strategy of hiring former poachers has been particularly important in protecting turtles, because those who at one time worked as poachers are truly experts on sea turtles and their nesting behavior.

Performance-based incentives for conservation It is believed that economic need in the communities drives much of the turtle egg poaching activity. Thus, any attempt to reduce poaching must also include an effort to address the root problem. In recent years, conservation programs throughout the world have had success using direct payments to reward local people for their participation in sea turtle conservation. Performance-based incentives are being applied to sea turtle conservation programs in Kenya, Tanzania, Madagascar, and Suriname (Ferraro and Gjertsen 2009).

The Paso Pacífico program allows for incentive payments, benefiting both local people and the general community. First, individuals receive a nominal payment upon committing to protect a nest (US\$10-\$20 per nest). Then, when turtle eggs are successfully hatched and



Figure 2 Aerial view of beaches protected through Paso Pacífico community-based programs. Photo courtesy of USAID/Jorge Paniagua.

verified by Paso Pacífico rangers and a community committee, both the "protector" and the community fund receive a second and larger payment of US\$0.10–0.30 per hatchling. The payment varies by species, with the more endangered hawksbill and leatherback turtles returning the highest amounts. The community fund accumulates throughout the year, and at the end of the year the community's leadership decides how to use the money. The performance-based payments program is also providing incentives to the Paso Pacífico rangers by awarding them a bonus payment for every nest that they successfully monitor. This payment is given at the end of the year. Also, a bonus award is made to the ranger who has protected the most nests during the year (Figure 3). Awards are given to the rangers in a public forum in front of the entire community.

When this program was being designed, Paso Pacifico held community meetings to discuss it and to form a community committee to oversee its transparency. Additionally, Paso Pacífico's country director, Liza González, spent one month in the United States as a Kinship Conservation Fellow where she worked with recognized conservationists and environmental economists to refine the project design and ensure that incentive payments are based on appropriate cost-benefit modeling. Over 25 nests have been protected through this program. We expect that the level of community participation will increase during 2009, the second year of the program.

The sustainability of the turtle payment program will be an important challenge to Paso Pacífico in the coming years as the program expands to new beaches and participation increases. Despite questions of sustainability, performance-based incentive payment programs can be an extremely cost-effective and successful method to protect sea turtles (Ferraro and Gjertsen 2009). To address the challenge of sustainability, Paso Pacifico is developing a Figure 3 Community ranger Felix Reyes receives an award for the most sea turtles protected in Year One. Photo courtesy of Paso Pacífico.

"sponsor a sea turtle program" where an optional donation to the sea turtle conservation program is added to the bill at major hotels in the San Juan del Sur area. We are also promoting the sale and use of sea turtle shower timers, to reduce water consumption in the local hotel industry.

Community-based tourism Paso Pacífico held guide training courses for 32 community members over two months in order to introduce them to concepts in natural history tours, use of the English language, and coastal ecosystems. Of these



trainees, 15 were selected for their commitment to guiding skills and invited to participate in two intensive courses taught by ecotourism experts from the Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance (MEA). Guides are now receiving tourists, and during the summer of 2009 three additional courses will be given to guides. MEA has begun internationally marketing these tours.

Ecotourism has long been touted as an approach to convince local people that conservation can be a sustainable revenue stream for local communities. In some cases, it has; in many, it has not. Paso Pacífico in-country professionals will have to carefully monitor the impacts of tourism on the community, both positive and negative, and whether any increase in tourism increases support for conservation. Paso Pacífico expects that tour operators and international visitors will recognize the expertise and enthusiasm of our young community guides. We expect that tour groups hoping to view turtles or coastal dry forests will rely on the community guides for tour packaging and delivery.

Principles for community participation

Community participation is at the core of Paso Pacífico's values as an organization. In guiding our sea turtle conservation program, we rely on three important principles to ensure that our programs have a measurable and positive impact: (1) program evaluation and adaptive management, (2) assignment of leadership roles to local community members, and (3) program transparency for local communities.

Program evaluation and adaptive management

Paso Pacífico is committed to adaptive management. For example, the performance-based incentive program must be carefully monitored to assure that it is producing the desired results. If it does not, the Paso Pacífico staff must work, under the guidance of the board of

directors, to change the program or develop a new system for responding to the economic pressure to exploit sea turtle eggs. Program monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation are ongoing processes. We have adopted the following model for employing this management technique:

Testing assumptions is about systematically trying different actions to achieve a desired outcome. It is not, however, a random trial-and-error process. Instead, it involves considering the conditions at the project site, developing a specific set of assumptions about what is occurring, and identifying which specific actions that might be used to affect these events. Actions are then implemented and results monitored to see how they compare with the ones predicted by the assumptions.

In the case of the Paso Pacífico project, we have operated under the assumption that community members would be quick to join the incentive payments program. After Year One of the program, we learned that it had not gained widespread acceptance because community members did not believe that they would actually receive the payments promised. Paso Pacífico made a false assumption in believing that community members would trust that we would follow through with our program. In response to this new situation, we have carried out a series of meetings to better explain the program and have highlighted the gains made by community members who have earned extra income through incentives.

Adaptation is about taking action to improve the project based on the results of monitoring. If the project's actions did not achieve the expected results, it is because the assumptions were wrong, the actions were poorly executed, the conditions at the project site have changed, the monitoring was faulty, or some combination of these problems. Adaptation involves changing assumptions and interventions to respond to new information obtained through monitoring.

Paso Pacífico's program is monitoring two important variables to determine the effectiveness of our programs. First, we are monitoring the number of nests destroyed by poaching, and second, we are monitoring the number of actual nests. During Year One, there was one beach that we set out to protect which had a relatively small number of sea turtles nesting. For Year Two, we determined that our conservation efforts would be more effective at another beach where the community rangers say there is a greater number of nesting sea turtles. While this is a simple adaptation to our program, we believe that it will markedly increase the number of sea turtle nests protected.

Learning is about systematically documenting the process that the project team has gone through and the results achieved. This documentation will help the team avoid making the same mistakes in the future. Other practitioners are eager to learn from successes and failures so that they can design and better manage projects. By sharing the information learned from the project, as in this paper, Paso Pacífico may help conservation efforts around the world. Paso Pacífico is collaborating with scientists and managers to document the lessons that are emerging from this program. Our project was recently highlighted in a global overview of incentive payment programs being used for sea turtle conservation (Ferraro and Gjertsen 2009). Additionally, we are sharing our experiences within Nicaragua at important in-country meetings, such as at the Nicaraguan Sea Turtle Network annual conference.

Including local communities and stakeholders

Traditional conservation projects around the world have long been marked by a failure to involve local communities in the planning and decision-making processes. At one time, public participation consisted of program managers merely telling local people in a series of public meetings what was going to happen. This one-way communication was viewed as sufficient to meet the mandate for public involvement. Paso Pacífico seeks to involve its local partners in every step of the project. This is the principal reason that we began our project with conflict mediation and why we selected our community rangers in a very transparent selection process. Community leaders helped us interview and select the candidates. This has produced a high level of trust between Paso Pacífico's Nicaraguan staff and their fellow citizens.

Program transparency

Paso Pacífico has adopted transparency as one of our core operating principles and values. We apply this principle to reporting the results of our activities—failures as well as successes—to our stakeholders. These include our partners, donors, and colleagues in the local communities, and to the Nicaraguan government. We believe this is critical to maintaining the high level of confidence that local people now have in our efforts to protect sea turtles. The payment for conservation program has been very transparent and open to community involvement. For example, in March 2009 Paso Pacífico held a community event where we reported the payments made through the incentive program and the number of nests protect-ed, and made a public payment to the community fund.

Next steps

We have been somewhat disappointed at the lack of community participation in the incentive payment program, as only twelve nests are currently enrolled in the program. Rumors have reached us that egg poachers in the community are discouraging people from participating. We plan to step up our efforts to find community volunteers through the use of public meetings conducted by our rangers. Since the rangers are from the communities where the poachers live, they represent a new, sustainable way of dealing with turtle nesting. Our environmental education programs will include hands-on activities and lessons in the local schools on a monthly basis. We recognize that children can exert pressure on their parents to become more responsible stewards of the environment.

Paso Pacífico is constantly seeking additional training for our community rangers. This training takes two forms: *technical training*, so that they improve their ability to monitor and document nesting activity on the beaches and expand their knowledge of the life cycles of the various nesting species; and *professional training*, so that they can improve their ranger skills. These skills include making visitor contacts, dealing with poachers, assisting community guides, and coordinating activities with the other entities that protect marine turtles. In addition, Paso Pacífico is supporting two of our rangers in applying for a scholarship to

attend a protected areas management course to be held in Argentina in the fall of 2009.

In situ conservation depends on the support and involvement of local communities. By giving local communities a lead role in turtle protection, Paso Pacífico attempts to ensure that our activities contribute towards good-will and cooperation among stakeholders. Direct economic benefits through ranger wages and conservation incentive payments will also benefit local communities by alleviating poverty. The strategies we employ also produce other benefits, including increased educational opportunities for community members, greater community cooperation, and a sense of local pride in the natural resources surrounding the community.

Epilogue (by Richard Smith)

I was in Nicaragua in late June of this year working with the community rangers who are employees of the NGO Paso Pacífico, and during that time a rare thing occurred. Two hawksbill turtles came ashore to nest on the beach that the rangers patrol. This is one of the most critically endangered of the marine sea turtles. Very few records exist of hawksbill nesting on the western beaches of Central America. Moreover, scientists know little about their migration patterns or population numbers. The rangers kept the two turtles on the beach for two days. (It is possible to keep the turtles for up to three days if a wet towel is kept on their heads and water is poured over their backs.) During the second day, a turtle expert from a regional program known as Project Hawksbill came and, in cooperation with Paso Pacífico and the employees of MARENA, installed a digital transmitter on the shells of the turtles so that their movements at sea can be tracked by satellites when they come to the surface to breath. This was a big deal. Children were released from school to observe the installation. Officials from MARENA were there, as were representatives of the media. Everyone recognized that the real heroes of this event were the rangers who work for Paso Pacífico.

It was very emotional when the children applauded when the second turtle returned to the sea after being liberated. I am sure none of them will become turtle egg poachers in the future.

You can track the movements of these two turtles on-line (www.seaturtle.org/tracking/?project_id=295&dyn=1246546646). On the left hand side of the page, you will find our two turtles, Karen and Brasilia. (The children named the second turtle Brasilia.) Click on the names of the turtles to see their movements. Brasilia had laid her eggs before the rangers nabbed her. Karen had not. It is likely that she will return to the same beach to lay her eggs.

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