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## THE FISHERS KNOW: USING LOCAL EXPERIENCE TO COLLECT DATA ON A POORLY KNOWN SEA TURTLE POPULATION

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When working on sea turtle conservation projects, support and cooperation of local communities are always desirable, as they constitute valuable assets for success in the long run. During the summers of 2015 and 2016, researchers from Loma Linda University and ProTECTOR Inc. carried out a program to involve local artisanal fishers from the South Coast of Honduras in collecting data on the juvenile hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) sea turtles that inhabit Honduran waters within the Gulf of Fonseca. Although there were several anecdotal reports of hawksbills along the southern coast of Honduras, few scientific data have been reported for this population. In June, 2015 we contacted several fishers in the area of San Lorenzo, which confirmed that during the summer months they often capture small and medium-sized hawksbill turtles as by-catch when fishing close to the estuaries. We offered fishers the opportunity to collaborate in a conservation project by collecting some basic data (Curved Carapace Length, Curve Carapace Width, and photos) from entangled hawksbills caught while fishing, before releasing them. Some fishers agreed, and data from seven juvenile hawksbills was collected in 2015. In 2016 we continued the project and conducted a formal training for fishers, through a four hour workshop held on July 19<sup>th</sup>. Ten fishers participated in the workshop, which covered general information on sea turtles (species, life cycle, threats), identification of the species present in the Gulf of Fonseca (olive ridley, green, and hawksbill), and a practical session on sea

turtle management and data collection. Using a stuffed toy of a sea turtle we trained them on how to handle, measure, and photograph the animals. We also covered how to record GPS positions of capture locations, although most fishers did not have smart phones with GPS technology. We agreed to provide fishers a small economic incentive for their collaboration, compensating them for the time they missed from fishing while recording data from turtles, and they agreed to provide a video of the release of each animal. Eleven animals were reported in 2016, ten of which were juveniles, and the other an adult female. The average CCL of juveniles from both years was 43.9 cm. The reported female, with a CCL of 68.9 cm, had tags in the two front flippers. We found that she had been tagged by Fauna & Flora International in June, 2016, while nesting in Estero Padre Ramos, Nicaragua. These data suggest that females nesting outside the Gulf of Fonseca may be residing or foraging within the Gulf in Honduran territory. Although we only have four GPS locations for turtles captured by fishers, they are all located in small channels in the estuaries. Thus, it is likely that turtles are swimming into these channels looking for food or resting sites. We plan to keep working with the fishers in the area for the following seasons. Besides the valuable data obtained at very low cost, these types of projects motivate local communities to become involved with turtle conservation efforts and thus, should be supported and promoted.

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