



TURTLE FOUNDATION

Protecting and Preserving Sea Turtles

Report 2008

Protection Program Cape Verde Islands

Beach Protection Program for Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) Nesting Grounds in Boavista, Cape Verde

Loggerhead Sea Turtles are threatened with extinction – as all sea turtles are – and listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The Cape Verde nesting population of Loggerhead Sea Turtles (*Caretta caretta*) is the third largest population in the world after the nesting populations of Oman and Southeast Florida. Up to 90% of the nesting occurs on the island of Boavista, the largest of the eastern islands with an area of approximately 620 km². The females are currently being heavily exploited by poachers for their meat when they come ashore to lay eggs during the nesting season which takes place between June and October. The female turtles are turned upside down as they come ashore to nest, which allows the poachers time to find other turtles and come back and kill the turtles at their leisure. The slaughter is particularly brutal and cruel, with the flippers being cut off first, then the animal is sliced open to remove meat, eggs, and internal organs, all while still alive. In 2007, over 1100 female turtles were slaughtered on the beaches, a number estimated to be 15% of the total population of nesting females in the Cape Verde area in 2007. This situation has resulted in the United Nations Environment Programme identifying Cape Verde as the conservation priority for Loggerhead turtles (UNEP, 2002).

The Turtle Foundation was determined to intervene and as quickly as possible put in place a program to reduce the current slaughter, while working toward the eventual protection of all the beaches and all the turtles. By early 2008, agreements had been reached with other organizations working in Cape Verde, such as Natura 2000, as well as local government agencies such as the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture, the Boavista Community Council, and the military command. This agreement resulted in the protection of a 15 km section of beach in Porto Ferreira on the east coast of Boavista, an area requiring a 4 wheel drive vehicle to access. See **Figure 1** for map of Boavista.

Originally, Turtle Foundation had hoped to set up a camp in Porto Ferreira to provide an on-site presence; however sufficient funds could not be raised in the limited time available, and the plans for the camp had to be postponed. Instead, Turtle Foundation personnel were housed in Sal Rei and transported to Porto Ferreira to implement nightly beach patrols. Military personnel were transported from the island of Sal and provided a house in Fundo das Figueras to use as a

base of operations. Approximately 10 soldiers were available for beach patrols at a time, with personnel rotated from Sal.

Nightly patrolling began in late June. These patrols were performed by Turtle Foundation Lead Biologist Christian Roder, Project Manager Norbert Hausen, and the military soldiers. See **Figures 2 and 3** for photos of the military patrol personnel. The presence of the soldiers was necessary to ensure the safety of Turtle Foundation personnel from the poachers as well as to provide additional disincentive to the poachers. The effect of these patrols was seen almost immediately. The patrol teams found turtles "turned turtle" on the beach awaiting the poachers' return, and patrol staff turned the turtles right side up and allowed them to return to the sea. When turtles were seen coming up on the beach, or encountered during a nesting event, patrol staff remained to protect the turtle from harm until they returned to the sea. Patrols were conducted on the beach, and also with Turtle Foundation personnel monitoring a large section of the beach from a lighthouse on a cliff, from which they could radio the military personnel on-site when suspicious lights were viewed from above. These were heartening events, and the patrol staff could see they were making a difference.

Sadly, not all turtles could be saved. The team frequently found turtle carcasses – in early July the remains of 10-15 turtles were found that had been killed several weeks earlier. See **Figures 4 and 5** for photos of slaughtered turtles. And the remains of carcasses from previous nesting seasons littered the beaches. By the end of September, the numbers of turtles coming ashore had dwindled, and it was clear the nesting season was coming to a close.

Nevertheless, the slaughter would have been far worse had the patrol team not been there this nesting season, and it underscored the importance of continuing and expanding the beach conservation and protection program. As a result of our beach patrols on Boavista's east coast during the 2008 nesting season we reduced the number of sea turtles killed on this main beach alone by 90%. Whereas in 2007 approx. 600 sea turtles were killed, in 2008 we have to report approx. 60 killed animals on this stretch of beach.

Nonetheless on Boavista there are still over 18 miles of unprotected beaches where in 2008 once again more than 400 female turtles were killed as they came ashore to nest. Therefore it is essential to strictly protect all nesting beaches on Boavista in order to save this important nesting population.

During the season, alliances and partnerships with the local government, other conservation organizations, and most importantly the local community had been forged. In early August, Turtle Foundation participated in an environmental exhibition in the capital Praia. Even Cape Verde's President, Pedro Pires, attended. Turtle Foundation sponsored a painting competition, with the theme of turtle conservation, providing colored pencils to the children. In late August, Turtle Foundation participated in another environmental education presentation sponsored by a Portuguese organization called "Projecto Cabo Verde", again focusing on turtle conservation. See **Figures 6-9**.

On November 7th, Turtle Foundation sponsored a turtle conservation and information presentation in Sal Rei. In October, all the schools in Boavista participated in an art contest, and Turtle Foundation arranged the transport of the students and their art posters from the villages to Sal Rei, where all the posters

were presented. In addition, a local artist "Titu" and a local environmental club helped students paint a nearby wall with a sea turtle conservation motif. The event was extremely well attended and well received, and Turtle Foundation is now well known in Boavista for supporting the local community as well as supporting the conservation of Cape Verde's sea turtles. See **Figure 10**.

Our goals for the future include continuing and expanding the beach protection program in Porto Ferreira. For the 2009 field season we hope to gather sufficient funding to allow us to build and maintain a camp on-site on the beach to allow continual patrolling, monitoring, and research activities during the nesting season. Toward the end of the 2008 nesting season, Professor Nuno de Santos Loureiro from the University of Algarve in Portugal arrived on Boavista. He runs a sea turtle protection camp in Praia Baixo on the island of Santiago, and also conducts tagging and genetic research there. He brought his equipment to Boavista and showed Turtle Foundation personnel his protocols. See **Figure 11**. We are hoping to have the funding and opportunity to allow us to conduct some of this research next year on Boavista. Our goals for our work with the local community include assisting with transportation for school children from local villages near the beach protection area to their school, and replacing a kindergarten roof, which apparently contains asbestos. We will continue to reach out to community schools with education and conservation programs.

Also of note is the recent creation of a coalition task force dedicated to completely stopping the poaching of sea turtles in Cape Verde, increasing local and global awareness of the Cape Verde sea turtles, and increasing scientific knowledge about this sea turtle population. This coalition brings together three foreign NGO's, two research institutions, and the Cape Verde Ministry of Environment, Land Planning and Marine Resources. Turtle Foundation is an active member of this coalition, being one of the three NGO's along with Natura 2000 and SOS Tartarugas. This coalition, called the Capeverdean Sea Turtle Network (CVSTN), will be officially created and announced on January 5, 2009.

December 1st , 2008



Figure 1: Map of Boavista



Figure 2: Military patrol members with Christian Roder (far left) and Norbert Hausen (far right).



Figure 3: Military patrol protecting a turtle just finished nesting.



Figure 4: A turtle slaughtered before she could lay her eggs.



Figure 5: A ditch filled with trash and discarded turtle carcasses.



Figure 6: Students coloring Turtle Foundation post cards encouraging turtle conservation.



Figure 7: Student's art poster.



Figure 8: Student claiming prize in art competition.



Figure 9: Turtle conservation at environmental exhibition in Praia.



Figure 10: "Turtle Wall" in Sal Rei.



Figure 11: Professor Nuno de Santos Loureiro measuring a sea turtle's carapace.