

**CREATING THE FUTURE GENERATION OF SEA TURTLE CONSERVATIONISTS: THE JUNIOR RESEARCH ASSISTANT PROGRAM AT TORTUGUERO, COSTA RICA\***

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Sea Turtle Conservancy (Formerly Caribbean Conservation Corporation), STC, has been conducting a sea turtle research and conservation program at Tortuguero, Costa Rica for over 50 years. Local community support has been fundamental in ensuring the success of the project, and since the beginning STC has sought to raise local awareness about sea turtles and conservation issues through education and active participation of community members in program activities. In recent years a structured environmental education program has been developed for students at schools in the area, with the objective of teaching the younger generation the value of their local natural resources, the need to protect them, and the active role that each of them can play in conservation efforts. The experience of a group of Tortuguero students at a regional Student Sea Turtle Symposium, and their subsequent request to STC staff to become more involved in the research and monitoring activities, was the inspiration for the development of a new education program for high school students in 2008. The primary goal of the Junior Research Assistant Program (JRAP) is to give students the opportunity to learn first hand about the work of STC, and to gain practical field work experience. Ultimately it is hoped that JRAP participants will develop an interest in conservation biology, be inspired to continue into further education to gain a degree, and will want to become future members of the STC research team in Tortuguero. Students complete a comprehensive program of theoretical and practical activities, working closely with international researchers based at the STC biological field station in Tortuguero. They receive presentations about sea turtle biology, their principal threats and conservation initiatives, and also assist in all aspects of the monitoring protocol, including night patrols and track surveys. Other important aspects of the program are their involvement in environmental education activities at the school, and the completion of a research project. Students who complete all the required elements receive a certificate and a specially designed t-shirt at the end of the program. Since 2008, over 100 students have participated in JRAP activities, although only a small number have graduated from the course. JRAP students have presented their research findings at the annual Student Sea Turtle Symposium, and in 2010 a group was invited to visit another sea turtle conservation project on the Caribbean coast, to share their experiences with students from other high schools in the area. And the first former JRAP graduate worked as an STC Local Research Assistant in 2010. It is planned to further develop the JRAP, to include components that focus, for example, on the work of park rangers in Tortuguero National Park, or biologists studying other species in the area. The JRAP has been successful in developing closer links between STC and the community, particularly with the younger generation. Programs such as this provide an excellent opportunity to create a positive conservation ethic among young people to guarantee the success of sea turtle projects in the future.