

NESTING BEACH USE PATTERNS OF LEATHERBACK TURTLES (*DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA*) IN BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE, PANAMA

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The province of Bocas del Toro is located in the northwest of Panama, contiguous with the Costa Rican border and the Caribbean Sea. It contains important nesting, migration and foraging habitats used by four species of marine turtles: leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*), hawksbills (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), greens (*Chelonia mydas*) and loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*). The leatherback is the most common species and the region supports a globally significant leatherback nesting population, with more than 4,000 nests reported each year at Chiriquí Beach. Since 1999, several intensive tagging studies have been conducted at various leatherback nesting beaches in the province: Chiriquí Beach, Long Beach and Soroopta Beach. Similar studies were initiated at San San and Sixiola Beaches in 2006. All of these nesting sites are within protected areas, and are subject to varying degrees of protection and conservation by government authorities. The research and monitoring activities are performed by members of local conservation organizations, with the support of international volunteers. Data from these tagging programs suggest that there is significant movement of individuals between the nesting beaches in the region, both within and between nesting seasons. This paper presents a summary of the data regarding the movement of females between nesting beaches as provided by tag encounters recorded by researchers at the different sites in the last eight years. It also discusses levels of individual site fidelity and determines inter-nesting movement patterns around the province. By increasing our awareness of the patterns of nesting beach use by leatherbacks, the results of this study will provide marine turtle researchers and conservation managers with vital information to coordinate and improve the protection of this critically endangered species in Bocas del Toro province.