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BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION**



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Current status of sea turtles along the northern coast of Peru: preliminary results

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INTRODUCTION

In the marine environments of Peru, four species of sea turtles occur: black turtle (*Chelonia mydas agassizii*), leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) (Frazier 1979, Hays-Brown and Brown 1982). The Peruvian Sea is used by sea turtles in their migratory movements as well as a feeding ground and possibly as a developmental habitat of juvenile sea turtles. (Hays-Brown and Brown 1982)

The northern Peruvian ocean presents two different kinds of ecological regions: the tropical sea from California to the 5° of south latitude with warm temperature (19°C winter, 22°C summer); and the cold sea of the Peruvian Current from the 5° of south latitude to Chile central with cold temperature (13-1°C winter, 15-17°C summer).

On the Peruvian coast exists traditional sea turtle fishing. The fishermen and their families use sea turtle products, such as

meat, blood, fat, heart and kidneys. In 1995, the Peruvian Government passed a law banning the capture and commerce of sea turtles and their products. Since then, the commerce of meat has been reduced, but still the capture of sea turtle continues because of the lack of law enforcement.

METHODS

Seven beaches, eleven fishermen villages and thirteen fishery ports from the departments of Tumbes, Piura, Lambayeque, La Libertad and Ancash were survey during this research. The survey covered 915 kilometers of the coastline, between Punta Capones (3°3'S, 80°0'W) and Casma Port (9°8'S, 78°4'W). The survey methodology had been based on personal interviews with fishermen and marine authorities and also on direct observations of sea turtles presence (stranding, handicrafts, carapaces, bones)

CONCLUSIONS

(1) In the northern department (Tumbes), 13 stranded turtles were observed: 12 *L. olivacea*, 1 *C. mydas agassizii*. This phenomenon seems to be very common in the area, according to the local fishermen; (2) *L. olivacea* has a greater presence in the North, whereas *C. m. agassizii* appears more commonly from Piura towards the south. *E. imbricata* and *D. coriacea* proved to be rare; (3) In Tumbes, sea turtles appear regularly throughout the year whereas a seasonal behaviour is observed towards the south, with higher presence in the summer (December to February); (4) The sexual state of the registered individuals apparently was: 73% immature *C. mydas* (n=22, mean=59.7 cm CCL), 100% *L. olivacea* adults (n=16, mean=66.6 cm CCL) and one *E. imbricata* immature (38.1 cm CCL) (Table 1); (5) The artisanal fishermen commonly capture sea turtles incidentally. The turtles get entangled in gillnets and hooks-and-lines; (6) In general, in the little fishermen villages, if the turtle captured is alive fishermen sometimes liberated them but if the turtle is dying or almost death they kill it but in the biggest towns the fishermen almost always kill all the turtles that are incidentally captured because a sea turtle meat demand exist; (7) The main sea turtle products that the fishermen consume are first the meat, second the blood which is drunk immediately after the turtle had been killed and they believe is good for health, and third the fat or oil which is drunk when they have cough; (8) The commerce of carapaces exists in the department of Tumbes and in the northern part of the department of Piura, because of the tourism. The carapaces

are varnished and some times painted and the prices depend on the size of the carapace. One painted carapace of 50 cm cost around US\$ 15.

According to the preliminary data obtained, we concluded that the northern Peruvian coast is a feeding and developmental habitat for sea turtles. However the presence of these species has diminished in the last 20 years. Following studies are recommended to identify and protect the critic zones that will help for the conservation of the sea turtles in the Southeast Pacific.

LITERATURE CITED

- Frazier, J. 1979. Marine Turtles in Peru and the East Pacific. Office of Zoological Research, National Zoological Park, Smithsonian Institution. Unpublished manuscript. 236 p.
Hays-Brown and Brown 1982. The status of sea turtles in Peru. In: K.A. Bjorndal, ed. Biology and Conservation of Sea Turtles. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington, D.C.

Table 1. Size means of the turtles and carapaces found during the survey.

	<i>Chelonia mydas agassizii</i>	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>
mean (cm)	59.7	66.6	38.1
N	22	16	1