



TROPIC NEWS

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

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FISH TRAP PROJECT-STX

The Division of Fish & Wildlife in St. Croix has initiated two independent projects to study the effectiveness of fish traps in catching reef fish. The first study involves the comparison of fish caught in traps with different mesh sizes. The second study involves shading fish traps to reduce fish mortality at certain times of the month.

SALT RIVER

The Division of Fish & Wildlife in St. Croix recently participated in a planning and review session with the National Park Service on the three proposals to establish a territorial park at Salt River. The importance of the Salt River estuary (mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs) biologically, historically and culturally was also the subject of a field lecture/tour of Salt River for six groups of students from the Montessori School in Frederiksted.

FAMOUS TURTLES

St. Croix leatherback turtles have become famous - again! A film crew from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were recently successful in filming the nesting of a female leatherback turtle from a "turtles-eye view". Information on the date of the public broadcasting of the TV special will be posted as soon as it is available.

LEAST TERNS

The public is reminded that Least terns are now nesting on beaches such as Sandy Point and around dried wetland ponds. Care should be taken to avoid beach vegetation areas where nesting occurs.

ONE OF A KIND!

On May 19, a young Leatherback turtle, 13 inches long, was found in Humacao, Puerto Rico. It was missing most of its left front flipper. Puerto Rico Dept. of Natural Resources brought it to Coral World on St. Thomas. The interesting thing about this turtle is that less than a dozen leatherbacks of this size are ever been seen worldwide, and only a few of those alive. This therefore was an opportunity to study this species in a special way. The turtle was responding well and eating voraciously. Unfortunately, on June 1, the screen on the tanks' drain pipe was removed and the turtle got sucked into the drain pipe and drowned. The scientific community lost a valuable living specimen and the little turtle, who had survived quite a bit, lost its life. It will be sent to the American Museum of Natural History for preservation.

1 LEATHERBACK PROGRESS REPORT

The following summarizes marine turtle activity on Sandy Point during May, 1989. A total of 22 individual leatherback sea turtles and 1 green sea turtle were seen. Sixty-two leatherback activities were recorded, including 10 dry runs and 52 nests. Egg counts were made in 45 nests, with a mean of 121.1 eggs per nest. Of the 22 leatherbacks, 7 are returning and 15 are new to the area. One pre-season nest has hatched, producing 63 hatchlings, for a total of 74.1% success. Additional nests are being monitored, but several days of heavy rain may have obliterated tracks, and exact locations of these early nests are not available for excavation. One green turtle activity was recorded, a dry run.

Fourteen EARTHWATCH volunteers contributed 1120 hours of work. Unfortunately, due to the small sizes of the teams, no weights have been taken this month. Teen interns from Central High School worked a total of 40 hours during May, and local volunteers contributed 56 hours of work on the beach. Additionally, at the urging of the project director, a cooperative effort was undertaken with representatives from local business and industry, the St. Croix Environmental Association, and individuals who volunteered their time, materials, and equipment to close most access roads with telephone poles and cable, and to fill in the worst of the pot holes and grade a large section of the entrance road. Work on closing the access roads will continue as poles become available.

St. Croix Environmental Association has been taking reservations for visitors and distributing pre-visit materials. The information that registration is necessary to visit the Refuge after 7 pm is slow to disseminate, fully 25% of the 337 visitors this month did not come through SEA. All visitors are informed about Refuge rules.

Visiting scientists from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, State University of New York, and University of British Columbia conducted research on satellite tracking, blood and gas sampling, and an attempt was made to videotape underwater activity of the turtles. Most met with high success. Due to problems with the harness, the satellite transmitter was removed when the turtle nested on Culebra.

Photographers from National Geographic and the BBC recorded some aspects of the project. Channel 24 of Puerto Rico filmed nesting sea turtles for inclusion in a documentary concerning the plight of these animals.

TURTLE SURVEY VOLUNTEERS SOUGHT

The Division of Fish and Wildlife and the National Park Service are seeking volunteers to do turtle nesting surveys on the beaches of St. Thomas and St. John. Volunteers will pick a beach, walk it once a week and note any nesting activities on a form. We will provide a survey package. This information will enable us to determine levels of turtle nesting for the Virgin Islands. Interested persons may call Rafe Boulon at 5-6762 (DFW) or Caroline Rogers at 6-4704 (NPS).