

Project Update: September 2006

The hurricane John affected the coast of Baja California Sur by the end of August and had a strong impact on some of our monitoring sites, impeding the access to certain areas and beaches. The situation came back to normal by mid-September and we were able to go on with our sea turtle mortality census.

After a first assessment we found that the all the beaches both on the gulf and the pacific side have been very affected and were full of garbage. Furthermore many dump-sites have been washed away and the garbage has been dispersed and in many cases thrown in the sea.

Monitoring the small island of Santo Domingo, located in Bahia Magdalena on the Pacific side, we found 23 stranded loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*). According to the status of barnacles on their carapaces, most of them stranded in the previous 24-36h (barnacles were still alive when we checked them), but the turtles were in a high degree of decomposition suggesting that death occurred days before at sea. Talking to other researchers operating in a closed area, we discovered that they found more than 70 sea turtles stranded in less than 20 days. This event has no explanation at the moment. Fishermen were also enquiring as this area is known for having a high rate of illegal catch. We were told that nobody is fishing with nets at present reducing the risk for sea turtles. Furthermore turtles didn't present any external sign of sickness (the most common being the fibropapilloma). We can just suggest some hypothesis concerning these unusual strandings: a boat operating very far from the coast, the hurricane John or a disease. We collected tissue samples that will be analyzed and asked for a veterinary to do some necropsy to find out the real cause of death.

