

Ecology Project International's IV Annual Student Sea Turtle Symposium Report to Rufford Foundation Small Grants for Nature Conservation

The *IV Annual Student Sea Turtle Symposium* took place June 18 on the campus of EARTH University in Guácimo, Costa Rica. The Symposium was a resounding success – providing a fitting celebration of EPI's longest and most productive field season to date. The generosity of the Rufford Foundation enabled us to bring together a larger and more diverse group of participants than ever before. This report details how grant funds were utilized and recounts highlights from the event.

I. Program Highlights

The *IV Student Sea Turtle Symposium* provided a forum for Costa Rican alumni of EPI's Sea Turtle Ecology Program to share their experiences, learn about national conservation issues and celebrate their hard work together with professional scientists and conservation practitioners. The day featured a balanced program of student and guest speaker presentations and a poster competition judged by guest scientists and educators. Talks and poster sessions were interspersed with fun raffle giveaways and refreshment breaks. The attached program shows the full schedule of events. This section elaborates on a few of the highlights.



EPI students during registration

The panel of guest speakers included representatives from both nonprofit and government environmental organizations. Randall Araúz, director of the Costa Rican NGO PRETOMA, gave an especially engaging talk on the impacts of both incidental and purposeful, illegal take of sea turtles and sharks in Costa Rican waters. He reviewed the problem and also explained innovative steps both fishermen and legislators can take to help address it. Olman Segura from the Ministry of Environment and Energy shared diverse conservation and environmental education initiatives underway in the La Amistad Caribe conservation area, which encompasses the zone where EPI works and where most of our alumni reside. His talk, complimented by striking slides of the Caribbean landscape, informed participants about ways that local communities and government are collaborating on conservation initiatives and urged them to get involved.



Student Estiven González J. explains about conservation of Leatherback turtles.

Students, however, are the real stars of EPI student symposia. Not surprisingly, several of the day's most inspiring talks came from the students themselves. Eleven students from the southern Caribbean community of Gandoca-Manzanillo bussed more than six hours to the Symposium. Each one of them pitched in to present about a beach monitoring and hatchery project developed and run through the collaboration of community members and the Costa Rican nonprofit ANAI to protect nesting leatherback sea turtles on their local beach.

Estiven González Jiménez original speech on the biology and conservation of leatherbacks was not only informative but impressively well written and executed. Estiven attends Liceo Experimental de Grecia, a school near the capital of San José that participated in EPI's course for the first time this season. Anthony Sandí Ríos of Colegio Diurno de Limón (a school that has participated in the EPI course for several seasons and that is located in one of the communities most important for sea turtle conservation in the Costa Rican Caribbean) gave the most artistic presentation of the day. Anthony read a moving poem (see appendix) he wrote about the difficult life of a leatherback sea turtle struggling to survive, and received an enthusiastic round of applause.

The poster competition is always one of the most enriching components of EPI's annual student symposia, and this year was no exception. In order to compete, students put in extra hours outside classroom time at school to convert draft projects completed during the EPI field course into science-fair quality poster presentations. Six schools entered posters this year. Professor Freddy Pacheco from the National University of Costa Rica, Olman Segura of MINAE and Natalie Valencio of the educational nonprofit Fundación Omar Dengo served as judges. Posters were scored according to use of the scientific method (research question, hypothesis, methodology, data analysis and results), quality of the research question, accuracy of data analysis and graphs, and artistic presentation as well as the explanation provided by the students.



La Alegria High School's research project poster

The judges were quite impressed with this year's posters, which were of particularly high quality. Two public schools won the prizes: Colegio de Limón Diurno from the city of Limón took first place; the Colegio Técnico Profesional de Siquirres, a Caribbean school that participated in the course for the first time this year, was runner up. Winners received handsome certificates printed on locally-made banana fiber paper and Spanish-language natural history books for their school libraries. Students and teachers from each winning school proudly took the stage to accept the awards and have their photos taken, providing a fitting finale for the event.

II. Attendance



Participants from different schools and organizations gathered inside auditorium

With a total attendance of 263, the *IV Annual Student Sea Turtle Symposium* attracted more participants from a wider geographic area than any previous EPI student symposium. Participants included 210 students and teachers representing thirteen high schools (ten public, three private). Another 30 guests represented eleven different Costa Rican nonprofit, academic and government institutions (Table 1). Thanks to support from the Rufford Foundation, EPI was able to provide or subsidize transportation for all students who requested it, including groups from the isolated rural communities of Pital and Gandoca-Manzanillo who would not otherwise have been able to attend. Grant funding also enabled us to support the staff time and communication resources needed to plan and coordinate such a large event.

Table 1: Institutions participating in EPI's IV Annual Student Sea Turtle Symposium

| Attending Schools | Guest Organizatons |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Colegio Diurno de Limón | Fundación Omar Dengo |
| Liceo Diurno de Ciudad Colón | Pacuare Nature Reserve |
| Liceo Alegría de Siquirres | Asociación ANAI |
| Colegio Dr. Clodomiro Picado Twight | Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía |
| Liceo de Sixaola | Endangered Wildlife Trust |
| Colegio Técnico Profesional de Bataan | PRETOMA |
| Colegio Técnico Profesional de Siquirres | EARTH University |
| Colegio Técnico Profesional de Pococí | Conselvatur |
| Colegio Técnico Profesional de Pital | CATIE |
| Liceo Experimental Bilingüe de Grecia | Asociación Guías Scout |
| Colegio San Marcos de Limón | Universidad Nacional |
| Colegio Maria Auxiliadora de Limón | |
| Centro Educativo Bilingüe del Caribe | |

III. Support and Collaborating Organizations

Symposium costs supported by the Rufford Foundation Small Grant covered expenditures for event hosting, including participant and staff transportation and food, lodging, prizes, guest speakers and facility fees; supplies; and staff time, primarily for the Costa Rica Schools Coordinator who led organization of the event. Collaborating organizations in Costa Rica, including EARTH University, Ríos Tropicales, INBio Park, Pacuare Nature Reserve, Fundación Omar Dengo and Copias Durán donated goods and services worth \$2,653, or about 65% of the value of costs funded by Rufford Foundation.

IV. EPI Season in Review

EPI's 2005 season has been the biggest and most productive to date. Our program is expanding to different schools and collaborators and it is causing an evident impact in local residents and entrepreneurs.

A total of 17 high school groups have participated in our field program this nesting season, including four new schools that participated for the first time this season. They all are looking forward to continuing next year. Three schools sent two different groups of students to participate. Ten of the 14 participating schools are located in our main area of interest: the Atlantic slope, where most of the country's sea turtle products are illegally extracted for consumption. The other four schools are located in Costa Rica's central valley.



**Pacuare nesting beach diorama
from Limón Diurno School**

During 2005, 230 Costa Rican students and 196 US students participated in our field program. Together, these students walked more than 10,450 km (6,530 miles) searching for nesting turtles on the beach. During the 107 nights EPI students patrolled the beach, 221 leatherback turtles were found, an increase over 2004. Students and teachers helped to protect 209 nests containing 21,201 fertilized eggs. We also vastly increased the amount of information in EPI's database, which students can access to get more information about the turtles they worked with (www.ecologyproject.org/database). The online database was introduced to students through a presentation at the Symposium, and students were able to test it out while there with the use of computers and internet access provided by Fundación Omar Dengo.

V. Looking to the Future

In 2006, we plan to incorporate more schools from a wider area on the Atlantic slope. Our goal is to include 50% of the region's high schools in next year's field program and Symposium, up from 30% this year. This will give us a greater presence in the region, and a greater impact on regional conservation efforts. By bringing more students into the program we will foster better understanding of scientific practices in conservation. We wish to continue increasing our impact on student's life choices and, by extension, the choices made by their families and surrounding communities.

In addition, we are working to consolidate strategies with government institutions and other non-profit collaborators to acknowledge the students' participation and give them academic credit for their work.

Next year's symposium will be a larger event and we expect to have more schools presenting innovative research projects that display their conservation projects and artistic skills. Students will meet the invited educational and conservation collaborators and learn valuable information about future opportunities and examples of current projects. We will continue to bring a diverse selection of guest speakers to show students different ways conservation projects are working in Costa Rica.

We want to express our great appreciation to the Rufford Foundation Small Grants for Nature Conservation. Their support was critical for our efforts to provide opportunities for science education and conservation to Costa Ricans. With the strengthening of our programs, we hope Rufford Foundation will continue to support our efforts to improve Leatherback conservation in Costa Rica and beyond.

VI. Appendix

Poem presented during the Symposium by Anthony Sandí Ríos, a student from Colegio de Limón Diurno.

UN DÍA MÁS

por Anthony Sandí Ríos

*Un día
en la orilla del mar
sentí compañía
y escuché a alguien hablar.*

*En ese momento,
veo algo moverse,
un poco lento
apenas podía verse*

*La ví decir
esta es mi naturaleza,
quiero subsistir y algunos quieren mi cabeza*

*Mis crías quisiera verlas crecer
y poderlas amar.
desovar es lo único que puedo hacer,
espero que me puedan perdonar*

*Por favor,
ayúdame a vivir.
Por el amor,
ayúdame a vivir.*

*Tengo tantos años,
Tengo tanto temor,
Nos han provocado daños,
Ayúdame por favor.*

*Confiamos en ti,
confiamos en su amor.
Ayúdame a mí,
Ayúdame por favor.*

UN DÍA MÁS

by Anthony Sandí Ríos

*One day
on the seashore
I felt a presence
and I heard someone speak.*

*In that moment,
I saw something move,
A bit slowly
It could barely be seen*

*I saw her speak
This is my nature,
I want to subsist yet some want my head*

*I would like to see my babies grow
and be able to love them.
To lay eggs is the all I can do,
I hope they can forgive me*

*Please,
Help me live.
For love,
Help me live.*

*I am so old,
I am so afraid,
They have hurt us,
Help me please.*

*We believe in you,
We believe in your love.
Help me,
Help me please.*