Viva Tartaruga!

GETTING THE WORD OUT IN CREATIVE WAYS

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São Tomé and Príncipe, a small island nation in the middle of the Gulf of Guinea in western Africa, is somewhat lost and forgotten by the rest of the world. The few outsiders who do visit the country usually comment on the excellent coffee, the excellent chocolate (considered among the best in the world), and their shock at seeing sea turtle meat being openly sold in the market and sea turtles butchered on the islands' picture-perfect beaches. All three of these natural resources are exploited by the locals as important sources of sustenance and livelihood in this extremely poor and undeveloped country. Of the three resources, production of coffee and chocolate continues to thrive. But the sea turtles are not doing so well.

In 2014, the government formally prohibited the harvest, sale, and consumption of all sea turtle products in response to the declining sea turtle populations. This measure was a crucial step toward halting the overexploitation that in 2013 and 2014 alone resulted in a record

337 sea turtles captured and 40 percent of sea turtle nests collected by local residents along just 15 kilometers (9 miles) of beach. Yet despite the recently enacted law, sea turtle eggs, juveniles, and adults are still openly traded, and turtle meat remains in high demand.

To tackle a conservation challenge such as this requires going back to the grassroots—working with locals to understand what drives consumption, enhancing consumer awareness through education, and finding effective ways to counter age-old yet incorrect local beliefs. Indeed, lack of knowledge among locals is one of the biggest challenges that our conservation project faces, including the ideas that sea turtles take less than two years to reach sexual maturity, that they breed every year, and that they lay "many, many eggs." The most frequently heard local adage is "Turtles will never run out! They're tough; they're hard to kill!" ("Tartaruga NUNCA acaba! Ela é rija, custa muito a morrer!") Some people routinely use this misinformation and similar excuses to justify the continued exploitation of turtles. But how can we get the message out in a country where few people own a television—let alone have access to the Internet—and where people rely on radios, mobile phones, and face-to-face interaction to communicate?

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES

The Tatô Program was initiated in 2003 by the local nongovernmental organization (NGO) titled MARAPA and has been jointly run since 2012 with the Portuguese NGO, Associação Tartarugas Marinhas (ATM). It has been the key driver of sea turtle research and conservation in São Tomé and Príncipe. Ongoing efforts include the seasonal deployment of guards to monitor and protect the key nesting beaches and a variety of educational activities. The following are examples of some cheap, quick, and effective techniques that our project used to bridge knowledge gaps among as many residents as we could, ranging from children to adults. The techniques were used and tested in five coastal fishing communities—Morro Peixe, Fernão Dias, Micoló, Santana, and Porto Alegre—that have the longest tradition of trade and consumption of sea turtle products and are adjacent to the main nesting beaches where we have been working in recent years.

- Getting dirty. We gathered whole communities to paint murals with a sea turtle conservation motif at the entrances to their villages, thereby making sure that the first thing everyone sees when arriving in the village is a beautiful painting of the sea. This activity, done with and for the community, was a huge success because the murals—full of sea turtles, fish, sharks, and fishermen—represent their pride in their culture and their close relationship with the sea.
- Turning children into artists. We held drawing contests in primary schools around the theme "What would you do to save sea turtles?" The contests were designed to raise awareness about the protection and preservation of sea turtles among children in first through sixth grade and their teachers. The contest was presented to each class with a short, 15-minute seminar about the life cycle of sea turtles and their main threats in São Tomé and Príncipe. The children were asked to reflect and to use their artistic talents to depict ways to minimize human impacts on turtles. We delivered art supplies to teachers, who were also responsible for returning the drawings and materials to the ATM-MARAPA

AT LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A member of the coastal community Morro Peixe helps paint an educational mural. © VICTOR JIMÉNEZ; Weekly text messages about sea turtle conservation, such as this one, are sent to the entire population of São Tomé and Príncipe © ANA BESUGO; Winners of a sea turtle conservation—themed student drawing contest pose with their artwork. © VICTOR JIMÉNEZ; A sea turtle conservation message in local dialect was painted on an abandoned boat near the main nesting area on São Tomé Island. © ANA BESUGO

- team. Approximately 4,500 children participated in this contest, and 78 were awarded prizes of stickers and school supplies.
- Presenting a turtle movie festival by the sea. We showed two animated films and one documentary about the life cycle of sea turtles at the very popular community movie nights. The screenings were preceded by a short quiz about sea turtles and a karaoke show with songs related to sea turtle conservation from the album Tamarear, which was produced by the Brazilian nonprofit organization Projeto TAMAR. We presented the screenings at 22 movie nights, with audiences of about 80 to 250 children and adults, who learned about sea turtle natural history in a fun and informal way.

REACHING BEYOND THE COAST

We wanted to reach beyond just the coastal communities to the entire nation's population, so we decided to go even further. With the activities described here, our message could not be missed.

USING THE NATIVE LANGUAGE

We painted two murals with sea turtle awareness messages written in the local dialect (called Fôrro) in strategic places near the main olive ridley nesting areas. The first mural was of an olive ridley, painted on one of the many huge boats that are beached and abandoned near Micoló. The mural included the slogan "Sawôge de omali é cá dêpendê d'inê, mage vida d'inê cá dêpendê di bô!" ("The health of the ocean depends on it, but its life depends on you!"). The painting is visible not only from most of the beach but also from the air, because the beach is near the capital's airport.

The second mural was painted over four days on one of the several retaining walls along the road that connects the capital city of São Tomé to Neves, the nation's second largest city. We painted a sea turtle skull accompanied by text in the local dialect saying, "*Uâm povo cú cebe na cá dana quá de têla dêfa!*" ("Wise people do not destroy their heritage!"). This painting not only is visible to drivers but also can easily be seen by fishermen at sea—impossible to miss!

BEEP BEEP—YOU HAVE A MESSAGE!

To reach an even greater number of people, we established an innovative partnership with CST, the leading national telecommunications company, to send weekly text messages about the importance of sea turtle conservation to the entire population of the archipelago. Text messages were sent from January until April, from the peak of sea turtle nesting activity until the end of the nesting season. The short messages were about the socioeconomic and ecological importance of these emblematic species for the sustainable development of São Tomé and Príncipe.

The aforementioned were just a few of the creative methods we used to reach the people of São Tome and Principe with a turtle conservation message, and we were very pleased with the outcome. Within a year of our campaign, turtle mortality had dropped by 50 percent. Most importantly, people have embraced the message, and they now greet the Tatô Program's nature conservation officers with a smile, rather than a grim face. We hope that other projects that face similar challenges will be inspired by our ideas. Viva Tartaruga!

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