

BAHARI KARUNA

CONNECTING PEOPLE THROUGH SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION IN WEST AFRICA

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In late 2011 a small team of Wildseas staff began working with a local community in Western Ghana with a view to conserving marine turtles in the region. With initial positive results in 2011 and early 2012 Wildseas sought and obtained a site on which to commence the first volunteer and marine turtle conservation project in the region. This was followed up with acquiring the necessary licences, registering the project locally and seeking funding.

Bahari Karuna meaning "Ocean Compassion" started operating in Sept 2012. Our initial focus was nesting beach patrols and data collection in the immediate project area. Local accommodation was secured while we oversaw the completion of our eco buildings. As night patrols would be severely restricted we refocused slightly on the projects longer term aims - to create a comprehensive schools education program (we are members of Dr. Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots program), speak with local Chiefs to gain their support and work with other local communities towards conservation in the region.

A big concern local canoe fishermen have is IUU fisheries (Illegal, Unreported & Unregulated) which are seriously damaging their livelihoods. This is an area we have said we will work towards ending if they will cooperate with our conservation initiative, to which they agreed wholeheartedly. To this end we are working alongside the Environmental Justice Foundation who have a great deal of experience in reducing IUU fisheries. Wildseas and EJF staff have visited many of the local communities together to hear their concerns. This issue is now being tackled head on and the fishermen can see that our efforts are genuine and understand that the solution will not come overnight.

In one large port, Axim, we have in place a 'Safe Release' program. 12 boats are currently signed up to the program, which involves basic biometric data collection and the subsequent release of any turtles accidentally caught in their nets. All releases are photographed. For this the fishermen were initially paid a small gratuity (40% of the local going rate for a turtle sold if landed, which would normally have been the case), however this has now been replaced with sponsorship of the local football team, provision of safety equipment to the fishermen and a scholarship fund for the wider community. Since commencing this program in late November 2012 over 160 turtles have been released. We will be training the fishermen in turtle tagging for next season.

The project has recorded all five turtle species known to the Gulf of Guinea and is achieving positive results and feedback. Many other villages have asked us to work with them and we are already known over a 100 km stretch of shoreline. This is thanks to the community liaison officers we have employed in different town and villages in the project region.

The project has much growth potential as we hope to welcome more international and local volunteers while employing even more local people in the future.

