

Dismantling Old Walls and Building New Bridges: Sea Turtle Advocacy in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Western Pacific



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Mount Carmel School students assist DLNR-DFW STP staff with green turtle nest inventory at Wing Beach, Saipan, CNMI as part of a community service project.



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Kagman High School Marine Biology Club members assist DLNR-DFW STP staff attach a satellite transmitter to a green turtle on Tank Beach, Saipan, CNMI.



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TAGS volunteers observe their adopted green turtle, "Big Mamma", after they assisted DLNR-DFW staff mornings with nesting surveys of Wing Beach, Saipan, CNMI.



TAGS volunteers with their spoils after a morning of marine debris collection clearing the way for nesting turtles at Tank Beach, Saipan, CNMI.

ABSTRACT: In these challenging economic times, government agencies are encouraged to pursue creative means to get the job done with limited funds and staff. One of the means that has allowed many sea turtle programs to survive and thrive has been through the assistance of volunteer organizations. Volunteerism on turtle projects is old concept in many regions; however, in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) it is one which has only recently been adopted. Beginning in 2009, the CNMI Department of Lands and Natural Resources (DLNR) Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) Sea Turtle Program (STP) experienced staff and funding shortages and needed to fulfill project goals and objectives with half the staff. Confounding this problem is continued illegal sea turtle hunting in CNMI. In the past, the poaching problem fueled a hesitation by the DLNR-DFW STP to utilize volunteers for fear of confidentiality breaches in nesting and nearshore survey sites. Due to continued poaching of nesters, other regional turtle programs (pers. comm. Guam DAWR) require a police background check for volunteers before they are permitted to survey beaches. Trepidation over disclosure of beach nesting and nearshore foraging locations also affected outreach efforts such as providing sea turtle data in local media or mentioning research locations in classroom presentations. Our goal was two-fold, to engage communities in volunteer activities, allowing DLNR-DFW STP to continue their research by filling staffing gaps and more importantly, to open lines of communication to allow community connections with and promote informed conversations about their sea turtle resources. We solicited volunteer assistance from: non-profit organizations, college and high school groups, local dive guides, the general public, family members, and co-workers. Opportunistic volunteer solicitations occur during classroom presentations, community workshops, conversations with scientists, or beach patrols. A more permanent volunteer pool was founded in 2010 by the Turtle Advocate and Guardian Society (TAGS), a non-profit organization whose mission is to help protect endangered sea turtles and their nesting sites as well as help educate the public about the current state of sea turtle populations in the CNMI. Since TAGS' inception, the DLNR-DFW STP staff have worked in partnership to coordinate efforts in beach clean-ups, volunteer training workshops, and camera monitoring of nests. TAGS, Northern Marianas College, Tasi-Watch, and other local community groups have also provided DLNR-DFW STP permitted staff volunteer assistance during nearshore surveys, morning nesting beach surveys, night tagging surveys, and nest inventories. Thanks, in part, to the DLNR-DFW STP's many volunteers we have been able to not only continue but enhance our research, monitoring, and education outreach efforts with CNMI communities.



Mariana Islands Nature Alliance Tasi-Watch volunteers learn how to help identify turtle tracks and nests while on their regular patrols at LaoLao Bay, Saipan, CNMI.



Turtle hand-captured and tagged under NMFS permit #1556-02.

Northern Marianas College students learn scientific data gathering skills under DLNR-DFW STP staff supervision to fulfill a lab requirement for their Natural Resource Management class.



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Marianas Trekking Eco-Camp participants learn about green turtle hatchlings during a nest excavation which yielded a few trapped stragglers on Wing Beach, Saipan, CNMI. The next generation of CNMI turtle stewards in the making.

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