

ASOCIACIÓN WIDECAST
Sea Turtle Conservation Program
of the South Eastern Caribbean, Costa Rica
2008 Nesting Season

Working in Conservation and Sustainable Development



WIDECAST

*Red para la Conservación de las Tortugas
Marinas en el Gran Caribe*

Working in Conservation and Sustainable Development

The Sea Turtle Conservation Program of the South Caribbean of Costa Rica is pleased to announce that will join WIDECAST Costa Rica in August 2007. After many great years working along Asociación ANAI, we will leave our friends at ANAI, and become part of the WIDECAST network. WIDECAST is a non-profit organization that supports local sea turtle conservation initiatives in most states and countries of the Caribbean region promoting cooperation between all nations. For over two decades WIDECAST has counted with the support from National Coordinators in more than 30 nations and territories in the Caribbean, and worked close with key stakeholders at a governmental and non-governmental level (including scientists, conservationists, resource managers, educators, etc.), to promote regional capacity and assist with the design and implementation of scientifically sound sea turtle management programs at local, national and regional (international) levels.

Our program will continue to support the sea turtle projects at Gandoca, Playa Negra/Cahuita, Tuba Creek, Peninsula de Osa and Ostional beaches.

Asociación WIDECAST was working as volunteer structure under WIDECAST Program since 1997 after the second Central America sea turtle conservation workshop in Tortuguero, now like independent organization is working for the conservation and sustainable development of the coastal regions of Costa Rica such north and south Pacific and south Caribbean is This last Region that represents around 5% of the national territory is one of the biologically richest areas of the planet with over 2% of the entire world's biodiversity. With Costa Rica's largest Native Indian population, English speaking Caribbean Blacks, and campesinos, its cultural heritage is equally rich.

Incorporated under the Costa Rican law, Asociación WIDECAST is an independent organization with its own board of Directors. WIDECAST formal membership includes an eleven Costaricans like scientists, representants of local communities, professionals and conservationists. WIDECAST has put into practice a strategy that links conservation and sustainable development through activities

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that directly benefit both the people and the environment. The focus has been on establishing the conditions for a self-sustaining process involving work in the broad areas of conservation, economic development, training and education, organization, and advocacy.

Since 1986, the WIDECAS Marine Program has been working to protect the Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) nesting population at Gandoca beach in the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge. The main objective of the project is to protect the nests from human poachers and more recently from the erosion of the beach. Before the project began, the poaching rate was over 95%, but with the presence of our night patrols and the hatcheries on the beach the survival rate has increased to over 90% last season.

Cahuita Sea Turtle Conservation Project

The Cahuita project started in 2000 after realizing that the area is an important nesting site for the critically endangered Leatherback turtle as well as the Hawksbill turtle. The project was established WIDECAS after the proved success of our other sea turtle conservation project at Gandoca. As in Gandoca, until recently the sea turtle nesting beach at Cahuita National Park remained relatively unknown to the outside world and the harvesting of eggs by the local population occurred more often than not. Although in the past this was probably a sustainable practice and therefore the impact on turtle population numbers was not significant, this has now changed with the improved road system to the area and the increased human population in the nearby towns of Puerto Viejo and Cahuita. The poaching of turtle eggs, increasing coastal development, pollution and beach erosion have all become serious threats to the sea turtles of the region. Although the project and data taken from it are new, it is estimated that like Gandoca in the early 80's, over 99% of turtle eggs were taken annually from the nesting beaches of Puerto Vargas and Playa Negra before the project started. Although the taking of eggs has no immediate effect on the number of turtles nesting, the population could collapse in 20-50 years when no new females return to nest. At the moment, the projects of Cahuita and Gandoca are helping to slow down that tendency and help to re-establish a viable population of sea turtles. The project staff patrols the beach with assistance from volunteers, keeping poachers away from the nesting turtles, in the meantime collecting research information and helping newborn hatchlings reach the sea safely.

The nesting season runs from beginning of March through to the end of July each year for leatherback turtles, and from June to October for hawksbill and green sea turtle nesting activity.

Each season, as part of the conservation effort, the project recruits volunteers both national and international, to help in the research and conservation work. We also welcome schools to work on the project as part of the environmental education program.

Volunteer Work

Volunteers are encouraged to join us at any point during the season. For six years, our project has welcomed students, travelers and professionals from countries around the world who have an interest in hands-on conservation and data collection work with endangered species. Volunteers can commit from a week up to several months participating in our program in Cahuita. Volunteers will be stationed in the ranger station of Cahuita National Park.

The main work of the volunteers involves night patrols and hatchery shifts. Other daytime work at the project in Cahuita may involve beach cleanup and small projects, including initial construction of the hatcheries.

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The night patrols leave between 8pm and 4am, when a shift of volunteers led by an experienced patrol leader walk one of the 6km long sectors of the 12 km beach searching for nesting females. An average night patrol will take 4 hours but can last longer if turtles are encountered. Once a turtle is encountered on a night patrol, the volunteers work directly with the turtle taking carapace and nest dimension measurements, collecting eggs and tagging the rear flipper of the turtle if it is a Leatherback or the front flippers if it is a green or Hawksbill turtle and collecting a DNA sample. The collected eggs are then relocated on the beach or taken to the hatchery where the volunteers on shift will build a new nest to measurements that were taken and transplant the eggs. The number of eggs, nest location and turtle identification information (*tag number*) are then recorded by the hatchery attendant for further data analysis including hatchling survival rate.

Hatchery shifts will take 6 hours. The tasks will be relocating nest (as described above), keeping out predators and tourists, giving information to tourists, taking nest temperatures and measuring and releasing hatchlings. The approximate incubation time for all sea turtle eggs is 60 days, therefore midway through the season the duties of the hatchery attendants increases as the hatchlings begin to emerge. At this time, all nests in the hatcheries must be checked every 30 minutes during the day and every 20 minutes during the night and if hatchlings are encountered they must be counted and released in the evening to an appropriate location along the high tide line and observed until they reach the sea. Hatchlings are never released directly in the sea.

Exceptionally volunteers are asked to work longer hours than their normal shift.

Depending on the part of the season the tasks you have to carry out as a volunteer will differ. The **start of the season until May** will consist of **patrolling** the beach during the night, with the number of nesting Leatherbacks gradually increasing, and **cleaning the beach** during the day. In **May** you will help **building the hatchery**. Once the hatchery is ready nest will be relocated to it. From this time **hatchery shifts** will be part of the job. Beach cleaning duties will stop but **patrols** will of course still go out every night. In **July** the first nest will hatch so **work in the hatchery will increase**. **Half September and October** is the end of the season. This means that there **only occasionally** come **turtles** to nest. **Half October** there will be **no more patrols** and only work in the **hatchery** with a **lot of babies** emerging. The season ends at the end of October when the last nest in the hatchery has hatched.

Cahuita

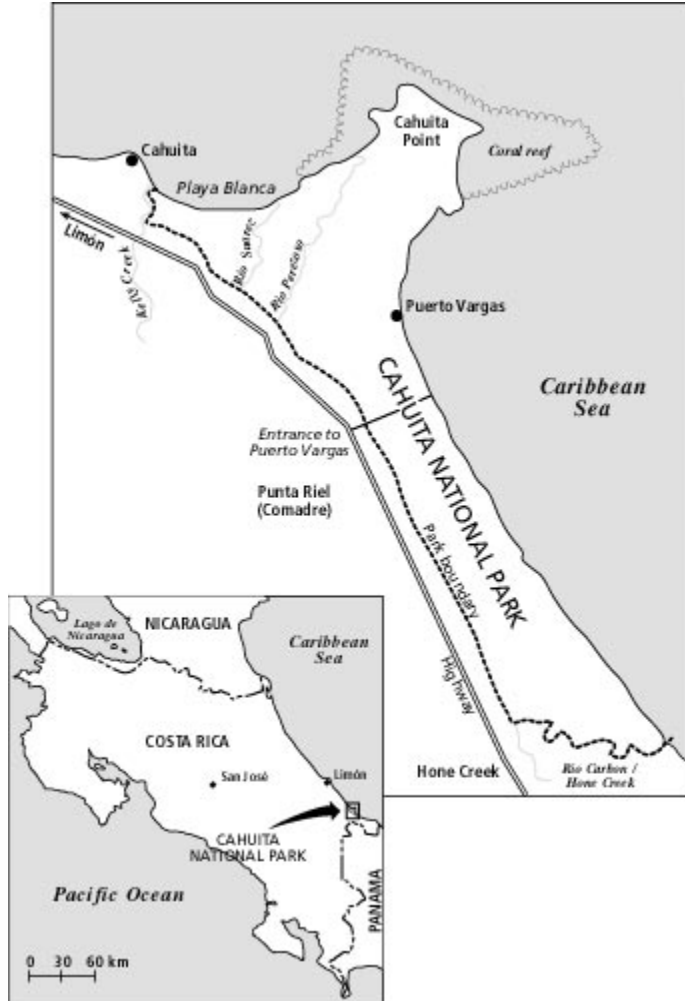
Cahuita is located on Costa Rica's southern Caribbean coast in the canton of Talamanca, province of Limón (Figure 1). The province is of vital importance to the national economy and ecology as it boasts the largest port in the country and contains a variety of the country's ecologically most important and diverse tropical forest ecosystems.

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Figure 1. Cahuita National Park and neighboring communities on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. Source: Adapted from MINAE's information pamphlet on Cahuita National Park (MINAE 1997).



The area is also culturally diverse. Talamanca is home to 85% of Costa Rica's indigenous peoples (Bribri and Cabecar, who live mainly in or near Talamanca's mountain range), a large population of Afro-Caribbeans (who live along the coast), mestizo farmers, primarily from the central valley or Pacific region (who live mostly in the southern valley of Talamanca), and foreigners primarily from Asia and, to a lesser extent, Europe and North America (who are dispersed throughout the canton) (Calderón 1998).

The area we work extends from Cahuita National Park to the Hone Creek River Mouth - a total of 7 km for the patrol beach. It is a very diverse location, both culturally and in terms of fauna and flora. Three species of turtles nest on our beach the Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and to a lesser extent the Green (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) sea turtles.

Cahuita wildlife is rich and you may see up to three species of monkey,

slots, crocodiles, caimans, anteaters and around 400 species of birds. Cahuita is the only place in Costa Rican Caribbean coast where you can find healthy coral reefs and the beaches are bordered by lush vegetation. It is a travel destination for many tourists looking for an unspoilt place compared with the over-developed Pacific coast, and it has a gentle, laid-back unhurried feel to it.

The Cahuita community offers services to volunteers to ensure their stay is pleasant in this village. Cahuita is a vibrant Caribbean town set at the north entrance of Cahuita National Park. Telephone and Internet access is readily available and there are horses for rent, bikes and snorkeling tours of the nearby reef. Cahuita is also a short bus trip from the beach town of Puerto Viejo, which boasts great beaches, surf and nightlife.

Costs

- **\$35.00 Inscription Fee**
- **\$17 per night / Minimum 6 nights stay**

Accommodation fee includes:

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1. Shared rooms with other volunteers in the MINAE Government housing in the park
2. 3 meals per day
3. Volunteers get their own bed
4. An opportunity to speak Spanish
5. Shared facilities at the accommodation – electricity (from 6pm until 9pm), clean drinking water, washing and toilet.

Inscription and accommodation **fees should all be paid at the Heredia office in cash** either in dollars or colones (preferably dollars). We don't accept payment by credit card or travelers checks. If you need to go to the bank when you arrive we will of course help you.

At the main office you will also be shown a **presentation** about the project, given a **manual** and **some papers** about Sea Turtles and of course an explanation how to get to Cahuita which one way costs approximately \$16 on public transportation. Cahuita is about 4 hours away from San José, but don't worry all this will be explained to you in detail when you get here.

Other services

● Airport pick up:

If you need an **airport pick up** we can arrange that for you, just get back to us after you have your plane ticket and send us the airline, flight number and arrival time. The pick-up is **\$20 before 10 PM and \$25 after** and the airport is about 20 minutes away from Heredia. As well from the office to the Caribbean bus station next morning is \$20. This is a service provided by WIDECAS and can be slightly more expensive than taking normal taxis, but at the same time it's much easier and faster because in Costa Rica, addresses and street names are not really existing.

● Stay in Heredia:

We can offer you the option to stay the first night(s) in Heredia at our volunteer's room called "**New Leatherbackpacker's**" for **\$12 per night**. The room is part of the office, which gives you an excellent opportunity to meet and communicate with the people from WIDECAS before going to the project. There are several cheap possibilities to eat close to "New Leatherbackpacker's". Naturally, you are also free to stay at any other place in Heredia or San José.

General Requirements

1. Be in good physical condition to walk 15 kms per night.
2. No severe eyesight problems (most work is at night without artificial lights).
3. No abuse of illegal drugs; no consumption of alcohol during working hours or abuse of alcohol at any time.
4. Preferably non-smoking. Those who do smoke should do so only in open areas and never on nightly patrols.
5. Be willing to work under **difficult and uncomfortable conditions.**
6. To know if you are allergic to mosquito and sand fly bites.
7. Have a personal insurance policy.

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What to bring?

- Sleeping bag, sheets or blankets and bed cover
- Lightweight dark colored cotton clothing for night patrolling, no jeans
- Raincoat or poncho
- Lightweight shoes for patrolling (they will get wet) preferably dark
- Flashlight and spare batteries
- Drinking bottle
- Alarm clock
- Garden or working gloves
- Mosquito net and repellent
- Basic First Aid Kit, especially for mosquito bites and small injuries
- Spare clothing
- Photo Camera, Books to read, games, swim suit and snorkeling gear

How to register?

1. Contact the Volunteer Coordinator by postal mail, electronic mail, phone or fax.
2. Send back the Registration Form with the chosen accommodation option and the dates you would like to participate. This is also your opportunity to ask any general questions.
3. Make your reservation for the dates you plan to participate and an appointment to visit the office in Heredia.
4. Make a personal visit to the WIDECAS office in Heredia at least 24 hours before leaving for Cahuita. This visit enables you to pay the inscription fee, confirm your reservation and allows us to give you final information about the project and directions on how to get there.

The law in Costa Rica (Decreto Ejecutivo 32443-MINAE) demands that every volunteer working in Protected Areas (all places where we have conservation projects are Protected Areas) have a health insurance. If MINAE (the costarican ministry for environment and energy) finds out that there are volunteers working without an insurance they will close down the project.

Since we don't provide an insurance volunteers that want to work in our projects have to get one for themselves (or one through your organization). We have a registration form (kept at the project place) where every volunteer needs to give there insurance company and policy number. If volunteers can not give these details we will have to refuse them the access to our project.

Contact information

Asociación WIDECAS

Apdo. 2164-3000
Heredia,
COSTA RICA

Tel.: (506) 261-3814
Fax: (506) 260-5789

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E-mail:
volunteers@latinamericaneaturtles.org

Or visit our web site: www.latinamericaneaturtles.org

Heredia Office address:

If arriving by Taxi, show this address to the Cab driver:

“Heredia, Mercedes Norte, 50 Oeste metros y 150 Sur del Bar España, casa con rotulo de tortugas marinas”, casa N° 193
(Heredia, Mercedes Norte, 50 meter west and 150 South form the España´s Bar, House with a Sea Turtle Sign), house N° 193

Or

Take the “Mercedes Norte” bus 2 bloocks west from the south-west corner of the Heredia Central Park. Get off at Bar España and walk 50 meter west and 150 South form the España´s Bar, House with a Sea Turtle Sign

NOTE: If you do not visit the office in Heredia to confirm your reservation, you may lose your reservation or scholarship. Money will not be refunded for missed days.

Permits

The project will organize all necessary permits so volunteers will work alongside WIDECAST staff and members of the Costa Rican Wildlife Authorities collecting information on nesting behavior of the turtles and removing eggs to safe locations for protection until hatched.

For more information, please contact the Volunteer Program Coordinator at the address below:

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Apdo. 2164-3000
Heredia,
COSTA RICA

Tel.: (506) 261-3814

Fax: (506) 2605789

E-mail: volunteers@latinamericaneaturtles.org

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Please Read!

The idea of working to help save the endangered Sea Turtles is a very romantic one. The reality is a very different experience. When deciding if this type of work you would like to be involved in, please remember:

Most of the work is at night working between the hours of 8PM and 4AM. While on night patrol you will walk up to 15 kms in the dark on soft wet sand.

There may be times when volunteers will be asked to work both during the day and at night. Work could include both a night patrol and daytime hatchery monitoring.

Night patrols will still take place during the rain. There will be some nights when there are few or no turtles nesting - (especially early or late in the season) - patrols will still take place. We cannot be sure when or if turtles will nest.

Cahuita is on the Caribbean coast. This means it is hot with 100% humidity, it rains frequently and sometimes heavily. There are mosquitoes and sand flies in the area, but no Malaria or Dengue fever.

Accommodation at the Cahuita project is basic local accommodation, as is the food.

Past comments from our turtle projects include "The work was too hard"; "There was nothing to do during the day"; "Too many mosquitoes"; "Didn't realize how hard it is to walk on the beach"; and "Too hot and couldn't sleep".

Working with the turtles is a brilliant unforgettable experience and we really need your help however this experience is not for everyone. It is estimated that if the current rate of decline is not stopped leatherback and hawksbill turtles will be extinct within 20 years.

Please think about these points before volunteering!

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Cahuita Volunteer Inscription Form

This information helps us to get a better idea of your interests and background. Thank you for your interest in WIDECAST. Please respond the questions in both Part I and II of this information sheet and return to us at:

E-mail: volunteers@latinamericanseaturtles.org Fax: (506) 260-5789
Phone: (506) 261-3814

Part I: Personal Information

Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
Home Address: _____ Telephone Number: _____
_____ Fax Number: _____
E-mail Address: _____ Languages: _____

Person to contact in case of emergency:

Name: _____ Relationship: _____
Address: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Part II: Project Interests and Background

What are the dates that you want to come (the days you will actually spend in the project and not your travel dates)? The project runs from March the 1st until October the 31st.

Do you want to stay at "New Leatherbackpacker's", and if yes how many nights?

Do you want airport pick up? You can include your flight details now or send them later.

How did you hear about WIDECAST and this Project? This is very important to us!

Do you have any knowledge about Sea Turtles and their problems?

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Please give us an idea of what you have been doing for the last 2 years. In addition to this summary, please be sure to mention any other experience that you think might be relevant to the project. Please do not attach a resume instead of this summary.