

REPORTS



## PRESIDENT'S REPORT FROM THE 32ND ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON SEA TURTLE BIOLOGY & CONSERVATION, 11 – 16 MARCH, 2012 IN HUATULCO, OAXACA, MEXICO

ANA R. BARRAGÁN

Past President, International Sea Turtle Society, Programa Nacional para la Conservación de las Tortugas Marinas, CONANP Camino al Ajusco 200, Col. Jardines en la Montaña, Mexico DF 14210, Mexico

abarragan@conanp.gob.mx

The Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation, conducted every year by the International Sea Turtle Society (ISTS), is a unique event that draws participants from around the world, from across disciplines and cultures to a common platform: sea turtle conservation. The symposium encourages debate, discussion and the sharing of knowledge, research techniques and lessons in conservation to address questions in biology and conservation of sea turtles and their habitats.

The 2012 Symposium was the third time in 32 years that this event has been held in Mexico, home to globally significant sea turtle populations and internationally renowned conservation programs. In addition to hosting two critical index beaches for the dwindling Pacific leatherback population, Oaxaca represents a critically important nesting region for olive ridley sea turtles, where they nest in synchrony by the thousands, a phenomenon referred to as *arribada*. This made Huatulco, in the southern coast of Oaxaca, an ideal venue for our meeting. The symposium was held at the *Las Brisas Huatulco Resort*, the largest Conference Center in the venue, which had the best facilities to hold a meeting this size.

The theme of this year's Symposium was Time of Innovation. Throughout the week, the meeting focused on the many innovative aspects of sea turtle conservation, including new techniques, new approaches, and new actors. We also took a critical approach to analyzing existing methods used in sea turtle research and conservation, in order to learn from past experiences. The meeting had about 500 participants from 52 countries, being a large proportion from the United States, Mexico and Latin America, as expected from the emphasis given

to this region.

### Regional Meetings and Workshops

The activities started on March 11th with a variety of pre-symposium Regional Meetings and thematic workshops. During the Regional Meetings special focus was given to each region's conservation issues: Africa, Latin America (RETOMALA), IOSEA and Mediterranean. Other thematic meetings included the Pacific Leatherback Regional Meeting, the Atlantic Leatherback Regional Meeting, Climate Change Workshop, "Train the Trainers", workshop on Biotelemetry Tags, Students and Teachers Environmental Education Workshop, Sea Turtle Medicine Workshop, Freshwater Turtles and Tortoise meeting, Forum for Sea Turtle Conservation in Oaxaca, and the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group Annual General Meeting. All of these contributed to a rich discussion of specific issues and were an important training aspect of the Symposium.

### Main Symposium Program

The main symposium sessions were held between March 13th and 16th, with parallel sessions running throughout all but the keynote presentations and special sessions: The Sea Turtles of Mexico Mini-Symposium, Innovative Tools and Strategies, and Mitigation of Turtle Interactions with Fishing Activities. Held on March 13th, the Mini-Symposium 'Sea Turtles of Mexico' was the special session dedicated to sea turtle research and conservation in Mexico, functioning as the forum for stakeholders in the conservation of sea turtles in this country to exchange experiences, update on progress in nesting and population trends in the Pacific and Atlantic coasts,

share conservation achievements as well as establish work strategic alliances. This special session was sponsored by SEMARNAT Delegación Oaxaca and Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, and it consisted of an inaugural Keynote presentation by M. Sc. Luis Fueyo MacDonald, Commissioner for Natural Protected Areas, entitled Conservation Program for Species at Risk: Species and Spaces for Sea Turtles in Mexico; thematic oral presentations highlighting research and conservation results in Mexico and a discussion panel entitled Pros and Cons of Tourism on Sea Turtles, during which the participants shared and discussed different experiences around the world on tourism with sea turtles, their economic benefits to local communities, as well as best practices in these activities to avoid any damage to the sea turtle populations and their habitats, now that turtle-related tourist activities are growing in the country.

The traditional session themes included: 1) Anatomy, Physiology, and Health; 2) Behavior and Movements; 3) In-water Biology and Monitoring; 4) Nesting Biology and Monitoring; 5) Ecology and Evolutionary Biology; 6) Conservation, Management and Policy; 7) Social Sciences, Environmental Education and Outreach, and 8) Threats. The major sponsors of the sessions were Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales and Fomento Ecológico BANAMEX. The main symposium sessions had keynote addresses by Dr. Larry Crowder, who gave a talk entitled Innovative Approaches to Science and Policy in Sea Turtle Conservation, and Dr. Lekelia Jenkins who spoke on Fishermen Selectivity: The Science of How to Best Engage the Right Fishers to Reduce Bycatch. The main symposium sessions concluded on March 16th with a closing keynote presentation by Dr. Jack Frazier entitled Revitalization or Innovating Innovation for Marine Turtle Conservation, and Closing Remarks by 32 ISTS President, Ana Barragán.

There was a single poster session that was ongoing for the entire symposium. Located in the Solarium Restaurant, adjacent to the Convention Center, it enabled poster presentations to be in the same space as the vendor booths, cash bar, and foyer area that was site of several social events. The *Meet the Authors* sessions gave substantial time for Symposium attendees to interact with the poster authors.

## Media

One week prior to the Symposium, media activities started with a nation-wide press conference to announce the event, which was later covered by both local and national level newspapers and television channels. A

number of articles in newspapers and online magazines occurred the week of and the week after the Symposium. This coverage helped draw attention to the hot topics in sea turtle research and conservation that were highlighted at the Symposium.

One novelty introduced for this Symposium was a more extensive use of Social Media forums and channels, in an attempt to socialize the ISTS talks, workshops and activities to a broader community of researchers, field turtle activists, volunteers and professionals, as well as people interested on the subject so all of them could network and collaborate on information related to the field and create knowledge repositories. The Social Media channels have proved to be the most efficient way to share content, ideas, videos, and almost anything. We have a Facebook Fan Page which let people share things related to the event as well as interact in conversations, questions or other invitations. We also set up a YouTube Channel where all the videos related to the event could be uploaded. A Blog was set up and linked to the main Symposium webpage, where periodically information regarding Huatulco, Oaxaca and sea turtles was uploaded. Stream channels were set to show on live streams of some of the keynotes, events and activities, letting people outside the event attend and learn without being actually there. These channels also allow people to ask questions via social networks like Twitter or chat. There is also a photo album with all the pictures of the symposium, some of them shared by attendees. Unfortunately, problems with the internet connection at the venue hotel (mainly low bandwidth) prevented us bringing these activities to their full potential; because of this, fewer videos were available and many posts were done using audio only. The links to these materials are:

Facebook Fan page:

[<https://www.facebook.com/InternationalSeaTurtleSymposium>]

YouTube Channel:

[<http://www.youtube.com/user/IntlSeaTurtleSymp>]

Photo album Picasa:

[<https://picasaweb.google.com/114001894980314737068>]

Blog:

[<http://internationalseaturtlesymposium.blogspot.mx/>]

Ustream channel:

[<http://www.ustream.tv/user/ists32>]

Spreaker (podcasts):

[<http://www.spreaker.com/user/ists>]

## Vendors

This year we made sure that the vendors and exhibitors were right in the middle of the action, setting them up

from March 12th to 16th in the Solarium Restaurant, along with the poster presentations and cash bar. Vendors and exhibitors at the 32nd Annual Symposium included Telonics, Inc., Wildlife Computers Inc., Sirtrack Ltd., Collecte Localisation Satellite, Desert Star Systems LLC., Conservation International, Drexel University, The Leatherback Trust, Ayotzintli A.C., NTV MSNBC, WWF International, Sea Turtle Foundation, Kutzari A.C., CONANP, Fomento Ecológico BANAMEX, Hombre Naturaleza A.C., and Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca.

### **Social Events**

It is generally agreed that having all Symposium activities held in one place is better; this time, having the event in an all-inclusive resort allowed us to organize many evening social activities since most of the participants stayed at Las Brisas. For the second year we had the Speed Chatting with Turtle Experts, a fundraising event that aimed to provide a means for Symposium newcomers and veterans alike to spend time chatting with a stellar collection of turtle enthusiasts and ISTS Symposium veterans. Students in particular appreciated this activity since they got to know people they always wanted to but had never approached.

The farewell banquet was held at a gorgeous tropical setting on Las Brisas gardens on March 16th, the last day of the main Symposium. The evening commenced with a sampler of world-renowned Oaxacan cuisine for dinner, and later the distribution of the Archie Carr Student Awards and the ISTS Special Awards. The President's farewell speech and acknowledgements was followed by the handing over of the Presidential trowel to the incoming ISTS President Raymond Carthy. The Closing Ceremony was followed by 3 hours of animated dance to Salsa, Merengue and other party music by the local band La Maraka, which gave the perfect closure to a fantastic and intense week.

### **Silent and Live Auction**

As is a tradition of the ISTS's fund raising efforts at each year's Symposium, both silent and live auctions were held. For this year we focused on handcrafts and items from the Latin American region, but of course every contribution was happily accepted. A fantastic range of items, which included showpieces, artwork, trinkets, items of clothing, etc., brought by participants from around the world, were displayed at the silent auction.

The live auction was held on March 15th, and as usual, it was lively evening with lots of fun, cheer, and competition.

It started with a presentation of La Escobilla Music School, a group of young and enthusiastic performers from a community nearby the arribada beach, who animated and set the tone for the evening. Later we had a presentation of the history and culture surrounding Mezcal, the famous Oaxacan liquor, followed by a sampler of the most representative kinds. After trying Mezcal, everybody was more than ready for bidding! Veteran bidders competed with fresh hands and tried to outbid each other for all shapes and forms of donated collectibles. This has been the crown jewel of ISTS social events for decades and this year did not disappoint. Proceeds from both auctions contribute to the travel grants for the next symposium. Special thanks are due to Jennifer Homcy, Marina Zucchini and their dedicated team of volunteers for this outstanding effort.

### **ISTS Awards**

Recognition of achievements has been a strong philosophy of the International Sea Turtle Society. A variety of awards were presented this year, including career achievement awards (Life-Time Achievement, ISTS Champions, President's, and Volunteerism) and Symposium presentation awards (Archie Carr Student and Grassroots Conservation). The Career Achievement Awards Committee, comprising elected members of the Society, and chaired by Karen Arthur, worked very hard to consider deserving individuals and organizations that were nominated for the ISTS Awards this year. The Archie Carr Student Awards Committee was co-chaired by Matthew Godfrey and Andrea Phillott, and the Grassroots Conservation Award Committee was co-chaired by J. Nichols, Manjula Tiwari and Ingrid Yañez. All did a great job in identifying those presentations deserving of the presentation awards. Congratulations to all.

The ISTS Lifetime Achievement Awards were presented to George Balazs, James Spotila, and Llewellyn Ehrhart for their highly significant impact on sea turtle biology and conservation through the course of their careers. All three are true icons of the Symposium, and heroes of sea turtle research and conservation. The ISTS Champions Awards were presented to George Petro, for his contribution to the development of whole networks of sea turtle monitoring and conservation through Vanuatu and Fiji, and to Laura Sarti Martinez, for her 30 years of conservation efforts and her influence on establishing leatherback conservation and research networks in Pacific Mexico. This was a very emotive award since many of her former students were in Huatulco to congratulate her on this recognition.

The ISTS Ed Drane Award for Volunteerism was given to Gary Buckles, who has tirelessly and selflessly worked with the Georgia Sea Turtle Center since 2007. The ISTS President's Award was presented during the Welcome Ceremony to Cuauhtemoc Peñaflores, pioneer of sea turtle research in Mexico and the person who helped establish important conservation programs at beaches such as Rancho Nuevo, Escobilla and Barra de la Cruz,

among others.

There were 135 student presentations eligible for the Archie Carr Student Awards (59 oral presentations and 76 poster presentations). All presentations were viewed and ranked by 15 judges, all recognized sea turtle researchers and project leaders. The awards were given to:

Category	Format	Prize	Student	Institution
Biology	Poster	Winner	Anahí Martínez Arenas	Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico
		Runner Up	Ana Patricio	University of Puerto Rico, USA
Conservation	Poster	Winner	Joanna Hancock	University of Exeter, UK
Biology Experimental	Oral	Winner	Daphne Goldberg	Universidad de Estado do Rio de Janeiro Brazil
		Runner Up	Anthony Rafferty	Monash University, Australia
Biology Field-based	Oral	Winner	Deasy Lontoh	Moss Landing Marine Lab, USA
		Runner Up	Karl Phillips	University of East Anglia, UK
Conservation	Oral	Winner	Monette Auman	University of Central Florida, USA
		Runner Up	Lori Kim Alexander	Florida Gulf Coast University, USA
		Runner Up	Nick Ehlers	University of Northern British Columbia, Canada

The Grassroots Conservation Award was given to Ever Ernesto Rizo Guardardo, from the community of La Barrona, Guatemala.

### Travel Grants

The ISTS provided \$100,000 for travel grant support this year to help 224 travelers attend the meeting. A total of \$32,359 was distributed as cash and the remainder as free accommodations at the Symposium hotel for the entire duration of the symposium, which included meals in the all-inclusive system. The tireless efforts of Alexander Gaos (Travel Chair) and the regional travel chairs made sure that all deserving participants could avail of the travel award. The regional travel committee was comprised of Aliko Panagopoulou (Europe), Angela Formia (Africa), Nicolas Pilcher (Asia/Pacific), Karen Eckert (English-Speaking Caribbean), Emma Harrison (Mexico, Central America and Spanish-speaking Caribbean), Alejandro Fallabrino (South America), Kartik Shanker (India/South Asia), Alan Rees (Middle East), and Kelly Stewart (USA/Canada).

### ISTS Student Committee

In 2010, an official ISTS Student Committee was appointed to promote knowledge exchange, enhance

students' professional development, and provide a centralized communication base for students worldwide. Since that time, more than 50 students from over 15 countries have become involved in the Student Committee. This is the second year that this President-appointed committee is present during the symposium, organizing different activities that we thought students would benefit from. As last year, this year we focused on three main tasks: (1) presentation feedback, (2) student workshop, with the subject "How to create an NGO", and (3) student mixer. I gratefully acknowledge Co-Chairs Lisa Komoroske, Annelisse Barcenas and Itzel Sifuentes for their vision, enthusiasm, and leadership that brought this new Symposium initiative to whole new levels.

### ISTS Business Meeting and Elections

The ISTS Business Meeting held on the afternoon of March 16th was attended by about 120 members. The opening statement by the President was followed by presentations of the Treasurer's Report by Terry Meyer, the Travel Committee Report by Ingrid Yañez on behalf of Alexander Gaos, the By-Laws and Constitution amendments by Jack Frazier, the ISTS Media call for proposals by Ana Barragán, The Awards Committee report by David Godfrey and the Nominations

Committee report by Frank Paladino. The meeting closed with an introduction to ISTS-33 in Baltimore, by President-Elect Ray Carthy. No resolutions were received to be discussed at the Business Meeting this year.

The following candidates were announced as winners of the ISTS elections: Roldán Valverde for President Elect, George Balazs and Alejandro Fallabrino for the two Board of Directors positions, Terry Meyer for Treasurer, Manjula Tiwari for Secretary, Mariana Fuentes and Marydele Donnelly for the Nominating Committee, and Dean Bagley, Sally Murphy and Jim Spotila for the Awards Committee. Congratulations to all!

### **Sponsors and Donors**

The International Sea Turtle Society and the local organizing committee is very grateful for the support provided by our international donors and sponsors, including many of our annual sponsors who supported us despite difficult economic times. In particular, we are grateful to the lead supporters of the 32nd Annual Symposium: the National Commission for Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) at SEMARNAT, Mexico, National Marine Fisheries Service, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, USFWS Marine Turtle Conservation Fund and Fomento Ecológico Banamex. We also had much needed support from the Government of the State of Oaxaca, Huatulco Municipality, SEMARNAT-Oaxaca Office, Ocean Foundation, Disney Animals, Science and Environment Program, The Leatherback Trust, Wildlife Computers and Telonics. And for our international travelers, there were several individuals that helped with funding rooms for our travelers, including Nancy FitzSimmons, Karen Frutchey, Peter Richardson, Kellie Pendoley, Eric Koepfler and Laura Sarti. I would like to thank each of these organizations and individuals for making the Huatulco Symposium a reality!

### **Key Members of the Organizing Team**

When I engaged in this journey I had but a faint idea of the amount of work and the number of people that needed to be involved. I'm deeply thankful to the Huatulco Symposium Executive Committee who tirelessly worked to help me develop the vision and theme for the meeting and to make of Huatulco an unforgettable experience; wonderful friends and committed conservationists who I wish to fully

acknowledge: Laura Sarti, Ninel García, Christiane Aguilar, Manuel Rodríguez, Gonzalo Villalobos, Gabriela Vargas, Shaleyla Kelez, Eduardo Cuevas and Alan Zavala. All logistics details were so efficiently taken care of by Gonzalo Villalobos and the BIOAX team that very few participants were aware of all the fires they had to put down. Also helping substantially with the planning were Terry Meyer, our ISTS Treasurer, Manjula Tiwari, the ISTS Secretary, Michael Coyne, the ISTS Managing Director, Samantha Karam, this year's Registrar, Karen Lazcano, our Volunteer Coordinator, Gabriela Vargas, our Vendor Coordinator, and Marco Palet, Gabriel Manzanilla and Diana Rangel, our PR team.

The Program this year is an exciting blend of traditional and new, honoring the theme "Time for Innovation", thanks to the hard work of Program Co-Chairs Shaleyla Kelez and Eduardo Cuevas, and of DuBose Griffin and the rest of the Program Committee. Thanks also to our Poster chairs Melania Lopez and Omar Chassin, and to Alan Zavala, who as Regional Meeting and Workshop Coordinator managed to keep track of the dozen workshops and regional meetings that brought diversity and covered a broad spectrum of themes... we are so thankful with all those participants! I'd like to thank Alexander Gaos, Travel Committee Chair, and the rest of the Travel team for making the participation of so many grantees possible. Another major aspect is all the volunteer work involved in the organization, and for making this happen I give a huge thank you to our Volunteer Coordinator, Karen Lazcano. The ever-important task of Registration was possible thanks to the vigilant eyes of Samantha Karam. Thanks also to all the people serving in the rest of the ISTS Committees: Awards, chaired by Karen Arthur, Student, led this year by Itzel Sifuentes and Annelisse Barcenas, and Nominations chaired by Pam Plotkin. Of course, I won't forget to recognize the huge effort done by the judges of the "Archie Carr" Student Award, chaired by Matthew Godfrey and Andrea Phillott.

Also, I have no words to express my gratitude to our Program Officer, Elena Finkbeiner, who handled the international fund raising. On-site fund raising events are also essential, so I'd like to give a big round of applause to Jennifer Homcy and Marina Zucchini for coordinating the Live and Silent Auctions, to Rod Mast for being our Auctioneer, to Emma Harrison and Zoe Meletis for organizing the Speed-chat with experts, and to all the vendors that decided to join us and make Huatulco a fantastic experience. ■