

THE COAST OF CAPE VERDE CONSTITUTES THE THIRD LARGEST LOGGERHEAD NESTING POPULATION IN THE WORLD

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Abstract

Extensive sea turtle nesting monitoring has been conducted in several islands of the Archipelago of Cape Verde during the past years. The loggerhead turtle is the only species that nests in these islands though green and hawksbill turtle juveniles are very often found feeding around their coasts. Around 90% of loggerhead nests are deposited in the island of Boavista on approximately 50 km of white sandy beaches. This is one of the less populated islands with more inaccessible beaches, as all villages are far from the main nesting areas. Another 9% of nests are equally distributed among the islands of Sal, Maio and San Nicolau and the remaining 1% of nests are found among the other six major islands and several islets of the archipelago. Consumption of sea turtle meat is a traditional practice in the Cape Verde Archipelago despite international and national sea turtle protection laws. Thus, the slaughter of nesting females on the beaches is very intense and threatens the survival of the population. During the past decades, female hunting has almost extirpated loggerhead nesting from several Cape Verdian islands and hunting pressure has significantly increased in Boavista. Since 1998, the NGO Cabo Verde Natura 2000 has monitored and protected the loggerhead population in the high nesting density area (60–65% of nests) of the Archipelago from the International Volunteer Sea Turtle Conservation Camp of Ervatão. In 2009, Cabo Verde Natura 2000 established a new sea turtle conservation camp in Porto Ferreira beach, starting the protection of the second largest nesting area in the island. From both camps, CV Natura 2000 is now efficiently protecting more than 80% of nesting. During the last three years, we have estimated a total number of nests at Boavista of around 13,500 (2007), 12,800 (2008) and 20,500 (2009). Nest counts were conducted daily on beaches patrolled from the two international camps, including between 65% (2007 and 2008) and 80% (2009) of nesting. The rest of the beaches were surveyed periodically and the total number of nests was extrapolated with daily counts. These data demonstrate that nesting levels in this isolated western African population are much higher than expected and indicate that the coast of Cape Verde is the third largest nesting aggregation in the world, after Florida and Oman. Nests in Cape Verde also constitute more than 95% of loggerhead nesting in all eastern Atlantic coasts. The distribution of nesting is not homogeneous on the island. We have identified a very important 10 km stretch of beach in southeastern Boavista that holds 60–65 % of nesting activity. Approximately 90% of nests are found on the beaches of the eastern half of the island. Nest density can be very high on some beaches with records of up to 2.0 nests per meter at the end of the nesting season on several beach sections longer than 800 m.