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The Elusive Manatee Makes New Friends in Costa Rica and Nicaragua

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by Ben Jolliffe

The West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) shouldn't be an elusive catch. Putting away an impressive 100 pounds of aquatic plants a day, it averages 10 feet in length, weighs in at about 1,000 pounds and, being a mammal, rises to the surface to breathe every five minutes or so.

Yet a team of researchers in Costa Rica – including several world-renowned manatee experts and a skilled marine hunter – who have been working to capture one of this globally threatened species are finding it elusive, coming away empty-handed on several different occasions.

As part of a bigger manatee conservation project across northern Costa Rica and southern Nicaragua financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), they are trying to tag a manatee with a VHF tracking device for further study and observation.

The project by Fundación Amigos del Río San Juan (FUNDAR) in partnership with Fundación Salvemos al Manatí de Costa Rica (FSMCR) is being supported by CEPF as part of its strategic approach in the southern region of the Mesoamerica Hotspot to promote environmental awareness and conservation through charismatic species.

However, the large mammal, also known as the Caribbean manatee, is wary of man and surprisingly agile under water. And although the manatee's numbers have restabilized in recent years thanks to habitat conservation and law enforcement, the means by which the growing number of tourists are exploring the Caribbean coasts of Costa Rica and Nicaragua has become one of the its worst enemies.

The motorboats that carry tourists exploring the tropical forests and riverways of Tortuguero and San Juan are colliding with the animals, either killing them outright or injuring them badly.

Evolved from four-footed land mammals, their lungs and uniquely positioned diaphragm extend the



© G Rathburn USFWS The manatee reproduces infrequently, slowing population recovery.



Local people, such as 80-year-old hunter Bill Sambola, are volunteering their services to help conserve the manatee. He knows the area better than most people.

DID YOU KNOW

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Visit the News & Feature archive for the Southern Mesoamerica Hotspot. length of the body cavity, making them particularly susceptible to injury after collision with watercraft.

Building a Conservation Network

Yet despite not making an actual capture, the tagging team has come away with perhaps a bigger prize. Biodiversity conservation efforts in the area have traditionally been hampered by a lack of coordination between the numerous different government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and private businesses working there.

Having to work across the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua wasn't making things any easier either.

But when Carlos Espinosa of FSMCR went to present the contentious case for manatee capture at Conservation International's office in San José, he was surprised - and extremely nervous - to find none other than the Costa Rican Minister of Environment, Carlos Rodriguez, in the audience.

"That kind of exposure is like dynamite," Espinosa said. "Rodriguez came to observe our first capture attempt and regional conservationists who had been against tagging could see what we were doing. Most importantly, they could see we were doing it for the animals, not for ourselves."

Leading manatee expert James Powell of the Wildlife Trust joined Bob Bonde of the U.S. Geological Survey and Ignacio Jimenez, a director of FSMCR, helping out at the capture attempt.

"The manatee population here is much less used to human exposure [than in Belize or Florida] and therefore more difficult to catch, but the educational program these guys have put together is tremendous," Bonde said. "It's the first step in fostering a genuine recognition for this species in their natural habitat."

The publicity accompanying the attempted capture brought documentary makers whose film on the threats facing the species aired on prime-time Costa Rican television, reaching some 180,000 viewers – an impressive result given the country's population of only four million.

Support From the Community

Support has also been growing at the community level because of the Foundation's efforts.

Priscilla Taylor is a 23-year-old biologist whose friends and family at the heart of Tortuguero's Afro-Caribbean community have made her an especially valuable ally. Having volunteered her help, she also brought with her the charismatic 83-year-old hunter Bill Sambola, as well as a large number of the hotel owners in and around Tortuguero.

"What's extraordinary is how the local population have changed their attitudes." Taylor said. "Ex-hunters and poachers are now taking time to protect the wildlife here – the sea turtles, jaguars, giant anteaters, tapirs and, of course, the manatees. They make a good living as tourist guides."

Working with the Tortuguero Conservation Area – the regional representative of the Ministry of Environment – Taylor persuaded more than 100 guides as well as hoteliers and boat captains to join the campaign to slow traffic on the waterways, putting up signs, distributing leaflets, and enabling the tourists themselves to understand the extraordinary natural wealth of the place they're visiting.

Other research, also funded by CEPF as part of the project, focused on environmental awareness in local communities in El Castillo, San del Norte, Barra del Colorado, Tortuguero, and Parismina that has since attracted further funding from the European Union through another regional program.

Research, Plan, Action!

Espinosa was able to use the research results to fine tune an educational campaign to reach school children on both sides of the border.

He created a lively campaign based around puppet shows and a colorful comic book, which he wrote and illustrated himself. In it, a manatee travels through the Tortuguero-San Juan area with a child, teaching him about wetlands, rain forests, conservation, tourism, and sustainable fishing, and how they all relate to each other.

He has also leveraged funds from organizations such as <u>Save The Manatee Club</u> – Florida , Oryx Films from Germany, and <u>Idea Wild</u> to expand activities.

Help from the <u>Araucaria program</u> in Nicaragua, sponsored by the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources and the <u>Spanish Agency for</u> <u>International Cooperation</u>, enabled Espinosa to push the campaign even further with field activities in the San Juan River Wildlife Refuge and in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve.

A puppet show recently toured the area, ending with a big theater festival held in the Nicaraguan town of San Juan del Norte. The awareness activities have reached thousands of children with their important conservation message.

Together, FSMCR and FUNDAR have ensured that manatee conservation measures are included in wider management plans for the Tortuguero National Park in Costa Rica and the San Juan River Wildlife Refuge.

While there is an extensive network of conservation actors in the binational area, FSMCR is one of the few NGOs that works on both sides of the border.

"We've broken a lot of boundaries on this project: political, administrative, and disciplinary – combining science, politics, and education," said Jiménez, who has 10 years of experience working with manatees in Costa Rica and is the scientific coordinator of the project's ecological research component.

"I love breaking boundaries! And so I love manatees: They move through political borders, they live between land and water, and they seem to move us with their agility and graceful beauty."

The last 10 years has seen great strides for conservation in Southern Mesoamerica, yet Jiménez has no illusions about what remains to be done. "At Fundación Manatí we have a big funding challenge – we need at least four people to carry on the work we've started for at least two years."

But the local community is increasingly behind them. Espinosa, Jiménez, and Taylor all note how

the manatee now comes up in everyday conversations among local people all the time. Sightings are noted, behavior and population figures discussed. The enthusiasm and love of manatees that Jiménez helped to inspire in Espinosa will no doubt find more willing people in the future.

Perhaps it won't be long before Tortuguero – "turtle catcher" as it was named by the early European arrivals – needs another, more sympathetic name to reflect the arrival of another, more environmentally aware age.

For further information, contact Carlos Espinosa, <u>c_espin@racsa.co.cr</u> or visit <u>www.fundacionmanati.org</u> or <u>www.fundar.org.ni</u>.

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