

The Hawksbill Cup

A SOCIAL INNOVATION HELPS SAVE TURTLES THROUGH SPORT

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The vast majority of the world's biological wealth is found in areas with high human poverty. This juxtaposition has led many governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector to develop conservation interventions that attempt to curb the destruction of biodiversity while simultaneously improving human livelihoods in low-income regions. Scenarios that benefit wildlife and alleviate poverty are extremely attractive and can be highly effective. However, although economic incentives for conservation can motivate behavioral change, such change can be ephemeral if the incentives are not permanent. This is particularly true in areas such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, where the livelihoods of impoverished residents depend on the extraction of natural resources from their local environment, including eggs from critically endangered hawksbill turtles. Human consumption of sea turtle eggs is illegal in both countries, but limited enforcement by authorities, scarce employment options, and high-density human populations located near hawksbill nesting beaches result in coastal residents commercially collecting nearly 100 percent of eggs.

Economically based conservation initiatives must offer egg collectors an equivalent or higher incentive to protect the eggs than they would receive for the sale of eggs on illegal local markets for human consumption. The purchase of hawksbill eggs from coastal residents for protection, however, can be financially burdensome, but more important, that approach does little to foment a local conservation ethic. Conservationists must seek new ways to increase the noneconomic values of biodiversity, such as hawksbills, in low-income regions to improve the effectiveness and durability of hard-won conservation outcomes.

We embraced this challenge by developing an innovative, culturally based competition that draws from a deep-rooted passion, the soccer World Cup, which is an unrivaled cultural phenomenon in Latin America that has the ability to destroy division, create relationships, and fuel excitement. In an attempt to harness Central

Americans' soccer passion for conservation purposes, we developed the Hawksbill Cup as a tool to shift the way coastal residents view hawksbills. The Hawksbill Cup emulates the soccer World Cup such that the hawksbill nesting season (May–October) represents the championship match between the two most important nesting sites in the eastern Pacific Ocean—Bahía de Jiquilisco in El Salvador and Estero Padre Ramos in Nicaragua. The winner is determined by which team, Team Bahía or Team Estero Padre Ramos, can score more hawksbill conservation goals at their respective sites.

We designed the scoring system together with local egg collectors and NGOs to encompass research and conservation objectives, while simultaneously ensuring that each team would have an equal chance of winning. Seven categories were established by which teams could score hawksbill conservation goals: (1) total number of nesting events recorded, (2) percentage of nesting females that were observed, (3) number of nests protected, (4) percentage of nests that were protected, (5) number of hatchlings released, (6) hatching success of protected nests, and (7) number of local egg collectors who participated in the protection of nests. Each category was worth one goal per month for a total of seven goals per month for six months, totaling a minimum of 42 goals during the competition. The team that had the highest number or percentage in a given category for a given month received one goal, and the team with a lower number or percentage for that same category received zero goals. If both teams had equal scores for a category, one goal was awarded to each team. Teams reported their results at the end of each month, the goals were awarded, and publicly displayed scoreboards were updated at both sites to show the status of the competition for members of local communities.

In 2012 and 2013, the Hawksbill Cup contributed to the achievement of record-breaking results at Bahía de Jiquilisco and Estero Padre Ramos, including 166 individual hawksbills tagged, 775 nests protected (96 percent protection rate), 77,686 hatchlings produced, and more



THE FINAL SCORE IS 21-25 IN FAVOR OF THE WINNER OF THE 2013 HAWKSBILL CUP...

TEAM ESTERO PADRE RAMOS

CONGRATULATIONS!!!

THE 2013 CUP WAS EXTREMELY CLOSE. EACH CONSERVATION GOAL WAS KEY THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE NESTING SEASON.

BAHIA JIQUILISCO & ESTERO PADRE RAMOS TOGETHER ACHIEVED THE FOLLOWING AMAZING RESULTS:



BEACH PATROLLERS, EGG COLLECTORS, HATCHERY MANAGERS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, VOLUNTEERS



than 200 local egg collectors participating directly in research and nest protection. These results are even more impressive given that before 2008 so few adult hawksbills were sighted in the eastern Pacific Ocean that they were considered virtually extirpated and that few, if any, hawksbill eggs escaped the dinner plate.

Perhaps as important as the nest protection results themselves is the impact the Hawksbill Cup has had on the way coastal residents view hawksbills. Because the way we communicate about the environment influences our relationships with the natural world, how coastal residents, and especially local egg collectors, speak about hawksbills can give insights into the values they place on them. Using pre- and postcompetition interviews, we saw a shift in how local egg collectors valued hawksbills and in their attitudes toward hawksbill conservation. Before their participation in the Hawksbill Cup, the primary value placed on hawksbills by local egg collectors was the economic value attached to egg sales, not a surprising view given the lack of employment opportunities at both sites and the reliance of coastal residents on the direct use of natural resources.

The Hawksbill Cup, however, has transformed the relationships that local egg collectors have with hawksbills by instilling passion and motivating them to participate in research and conservation initiatives for reasons other than personal economics. Now they are rising to the challenge of protecting more hawksbills than their neighbors, a challenge that has begun to change their views toward the turtles. Postcompetition interviews revealed that although local egg collectors still spoke of economics, their words were now in terms of reciprocal well-being. Turtles provide economic assistance to coastal residents, and coastal residents provide protection to turtles.

Furthermore, residents now associated other values with hawksbills, speaking of them in terms of patriotism, natural heritage, and pride in being able to share their homes with the last remaining hawksbills. Local egg collectors highlighted the need to protect hawksbills because of their ecological role and their highly endangered status. And at both sites, they spoke enthusiastically about the human connection generated by the Hawksbill Cup—the camaraderie within and between competing teams, the relationships of trust replacing previously high levels of distrust, and the excitement of uniting around a common goal infused with passion. The shared passion exhibited by both teams is exemplified in the videos they created to build the spirit of competition (see the videos at www.hawksbill.org). The Hawksbill Cup slogan of “We are one team!” that rings throughout the videos of both teams makes it clear that no matter which team wins the competition in a given year, all participating local egg collectors form one team in the fight to protect hawksbills in the eastern Pacific Ocean.

Most of the successes of the Hawksbill Cup have come from its ability to directly engage coastal residents in research and conservation in a way that recognizes their interests and motivates them to participate. By harnessing local egg collectors’ passion for soccer and competition, the Hawksbill Cup has begun to increase the non-economic values of hawksbills for coastal residents at both sites and has enhanced local interest and participation in nest protection activities, facilitated information exchange and experience sharing among egg collectors, positioned hawksbills as an emblematic species at both sites, and shifted local discourse on hawksbill conservation away from purely economic terms. Moreover, the Hawksbill Cup has contributed to record numbers of hawksbill nests protected and hatchlings produced in El Salvador and Nicaragua, demonstrating the ability of culturally based competitions to garner local support for conservation in low-income regions. ■

LEFT: The Hawksbill Cup (Copa Carey) was awarded to Team Estero Padre Ramos for scoring the most “hawksbill conservation goals.” © VELKISS GADEA / FFI RIGHT: A flyer celebrating the winners and their achievements in turtle conservation. © CLEIDE CEA & INGRID YAÑEZ / ICAPO