

PRESS RELEASE

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Illegal gillnetters, shrimp boats, nest robbers, and vehicles threaten endangered sea turtles on Playa Manzanillo, Nicoya Peninsula

Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary's sea turtle protection project at Playa Manzanillo de Cobano on the Nicoya Peninsula has revealed the operation of up to 100 boats using illegal gillnets in the waters near Manzanillo. Most of these boats are gillnetting inside the 12 kilometers of strictly protected ocean that is part of the Caletas/Ario Wildlife Refuge.

The gillnets entangle sea turtles attempting to reach the beach to lay their eggs, causing their death by drowning. Eye witnesses report that gillnetters dismember the turtles for their flesh and shells, dump the remains overboard, and sell the meat and shells in Puntarenas.

Hawksbill, leatherback, olive ridley, black, and green turtles nest on Playa Manzanillo. All except the ridley are critically endangered globally. The hawksbill is the most endangered sea turtle on the planet.

All species of sea turtles are protected by international and national laws. In Costa Rica the penalty for nest robbing or killing a sea turtle is three years in prison. These protective, but poorly enforced, laws reflect the tremendous obstacles to sea turtle survival: only one hatchling in one thousand that actually reach the sea survive their first year.

The tragic situation at Playa Manzanillo prompted Rainsong to request immediate action from pertinent Costa Rican authorities on December 20, 2009.

On Friday, January 8, 2010, three officials from the Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET) and five public police officials accompanied Mary Lynn Perry, President of Rainsong, and Walter Cuendis Lopez, Rainsong's Sea Turtle Patrol Captain, to inspect and photograph the boats using the illegal nets in order for Rainsong to file a Denuncia.



Sea turtles are drowning in illegal gillnets used in the protected waters of Caletas/Ario Refuge.



Authorities investigate, but no action has been taken to date against illegal gillnetters.

After much insistence, PRETOMA's Erick Lopez Aguero convinced the Costa Rican Coast Guard to make a sweep at sea to confiscate illegal nets and document gillnetters' boats for legal prosecutions. This operation began on Monday, January 18. The Coast Guard never reached the rocky reef of the Caletas/Ario refuge, however, because the patrol boat had filled the vessel with confiscated gillnets before even reaching Playa Coyote, north of Manzanillo. Rainsong is still waiting for the promised return of the Costa Rican Coast Guard to remove the gillnets inside the national wildlife refuge.

On January 25, PRETOMA officers and Rainsong's Walter and 'Pipo' (Edier Rodriguez) inspected refuge waters in PRETOMA's two launches. Many signs of gillnetting paraphernalia were found, but the group was unable to pull the devices because police officers requested did not show up to provide authorization for their removal.

Where is MINAET?

MINAET, which has legal jurisdiction for wildlife in the protected area, has been asked repeatedly by Rainsong to bring its authority to the situation. MINAET's Area de Conservacion Tempisque (ACT) offices in Nicoya and Hojanche have not responded with any action to date. According to Nathaniel Grew Jr., Refuge Representative, MINAET abandoned this site more than three years ago, breaking a contract with the Refuge to provide presence of authority and patrols.

Threats from all sides: Illegal shrimpboats inside the refuge; cars, nest robbers, driftwood and trash

Turtles able to reach the beach to nest face additional threats. It is illegal to drive on Costa Rica's beaches, but cars regularly plough deep ruts into the sand at Playa Manzanillo. Both turtle nests and hatchlings are crushed by the vehicles, and hatchlings trapped in the ruts cannot reach the sea before heat from the morning sun kills them. Driftwood and trash on the beach also make it difficult for the hatchlings to reach the ocean. Nest robbers take an additional heavy toll.



Cars on Playa Manzanillo crush both turtle nests and hatchlings trying to make their way to sea.

Sea turtle protection project successes

Rainsong's Patrol Captain, Walter Cuendis, patrols 14 kilometers of nesting beaches nightly, on foot. A tireless, fearless protector of the sea turtles, he is known as "tortuga ninja" by locals and Rainsong volunteers. Walter and Mary have endured death threats and aggression from angry gillnetters who want to end all endeavors to bring the authorities to Manzanillo to stop the massacre of marine life.



Newborn olive ridley hatchling on Playa Manzanillo

Rainsong's protection project, which began patrols on December 20, has encountered 35 nests to date. Eight were leatherback, the others were olive ridley and black sea turtles. Eleven nests, two of which were leatherback, were rescued and transferred to a safe location. The rest of the nests were raided by human nest robbers before they could be saved. Approximately 275 hatchlings have been rescued and escorted to the sea, from nests that escaped nest robbers before Rainsong began patrols.

Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary is seeking sponsors, volunteers, and donations to continue the fight to protect the unique sea turtle nesting site at Playa Manzanillo. For more information, please visit www.costaricaanimals.org, www.rainsongsanctuary.com, or send an email to:

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