

“HELP OUT OR SEA TURTLES MISS OUT”

A Sea Turtle Education and Outreach Program for the Netherlands Antilles

By

Dominique Vissenberg¹

Emma Harrison²

Education and community outreach have become integral components of successful sea turtle conservation projects. To raise awareness about sea turtles, an extensive year-long outreach and education campaign was developed and implemented by the Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance (DCNA) for the Dutch Windward Islands of Saba, St Eustatius and St Maarten. The Truus and Gerrit van Riemsdijk Foundation sponsored this initiative. The DCNA is a recently formed foundation that brings together the Nature Conservation Management Organizations of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. The sea turtle awareness project was the first joint project of this extent for the Conservation Foundations of these three islands and their pilot project to implement environmental education. This all contributed to the new working structure of DCNA and the protected area management organizations.

The campaign entitled “Help out or sea turtles miss out” and featuring “Scout” the mascot, was adapted from the “RARE – Promoting Protection through Pride” program that has achieved widespread success in many countries in the Caribbean region. The three aims were to increase pride in the fact that these islands still have sea turtles, to create awareness that they need protection and to identify concrete ways in which the public can help.

Different educational methods and instruments were used to increase public understanding of the region’s sea turtles; the different species, threats and conservation status. The local community of the three Windward Islands was divided into different target groups and approached at their levels. These activities included public presentations, a puppet show, a school song, a portable exhibition and different competitions. All lessons and activities were carried out with the emphasis placed on active participation and fun. Also various attractive educational materials and information handouts were produced, such as posters, brochures and badges. The project effectiveness was evaluated by means of a survey that was conducted at the start and end of the program.

The end survey showed that 75% of the persons interviewed had heard about the sea turtle project. 45% of them mentioned they had actively taken part or knew somebody that had taken

part in a 'sea turtle activity' related to this project. School visits and newspaper articles appeared to be the most effective approach to reach the community. 36% of the persons interviewed mentioned that the program got them more interested in sea turtles and 42% mentioned to be proud that sea turtles are still on our islands. When comparing the initial survey to the evaluation survey, it showed that persons appeared to have better knowledge of sea turtle facts and therefore answered more questions correctly. In general, the project showed much positive feedback from the community on all three islands, and offered a great deal of encouragement to continue the work to prolong its success in sea turtle conservation and environmental education in general.

¹ Nature Foundation St Maarten, Philipsburg, St Maarten, Netherlands Antilles

² St Eustatius National Parks, Gallows Bay, St Eustatius, Netherlands Antilles