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UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.45/INF.29

29 April 2025

Original: ENGLISH

Eleventh Meeting of the Scientific and Technical
Advisory Committee (STAC) of the Protocol
Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife
(SPA)W) in the Wider Caribbean Region

Panama City, Panama
30 June – 3 July 2025

WIDECAS: Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network Activity Highlights: 2023-2024

This meeting is being convened hybrid. Delegates are kindly requested to access all meeting documents electronically for download as necessary.

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WIDECAST: Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network

Activity Highlights: 2023-2024

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OVERVIEW

WIDECAST has been an integral partner of the Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP) since its inception. Concern over the status of shared sea turtle stocks and their habitats was the basis for APCEP ([Action Plan for the Caribbean Environment Programme](#)) project 6/1, which was ranked among the first cohort of 'projects of common interest' to be implemented by the CEP and one of the first to be funded. WIDECAST's success in local project development, national recovery planning, and regional information-sharing has long been a model for other taxa-specific initiatives in the region and has resulted in a strong regional capacity for science-based sea turtle management.

Sea turtles, once abundant in the Caribbean Sea and serving as keystone species in tropical marine ecosystems, are severely reduced from historical levels, both in population size and range. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, persistent over-exploitation, especially of gravid females, and widespread collection of eggs are primarily responsible for observed declines at regional and global scales. All six species of Caribbean-occurring sea turtle are listed in Annex II of the SPAW Protocol, affording them the full weight of protection under the Cartagena Convention and its Protocols.

In addition to a largely unmanaged harvest that has spanned centuries, sea turtles are accidentally captured in active or abandoned fishing gear, resulting in death to uncounted thousands of turtles annually. Moreover, modern climate change, high density coastal development, coral reef and seagrass degradation, oil spills, chemical waste, and persistent plastic and other marine debris have damaged or eliminated nesting beaches and feeding areas. Because sea turtles are highly migratory at all life stages, what appears as a decline in a local population may be a direct consequence of the activities of people many hundreds or thousands of kilometers away.

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With affiliated programs in every country in the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) (and further including Bermuda and Brazil), WIDECAS^T works at scale to address these threats. Furthermore, the network is a proactive and inclusive mechanism for developing and disseminating science-based tools on behalf of the SPAW Protocol. In support of Art. 10, which states that “Each Party shall ... carry out species recovery, management, planning and other measures to effect the survival of [endangered and threatened species]”, WIDECAS^T experts collaborate with local stakeholders to develop comprehensive national conservation blueprints known as Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plans to include sea turtle status and distribution, major causes of mortality, effectiveness of existing legislation, present and historical roles of sea turtles in local culture and economy, and recommendations for research, management, public awareness, and conservation.

ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS: 2023-2024

2023 WIDECAS^T Annual Meeting

WIDECAS^T convened an Annual Meeting from 19-20 March 2023 in Cartagena, Colombia. The meeting attracted more than 70 WCR sea turtle conservationists, marine scientists, educators, policymakers, program directors, and field biologists from 24 WCR nations and territories. Topics included Lessons in the Power of Connectivity, Conservation & Research in Nearshore Waters, Research at Sea, Conservation & Protection Measures on Nesting Beaches, National Updates, Regional Conservation Updates, the Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG) Conservation Priorities Framework, and Transboundary Initiatives. Results of the Annual Meeting included several recommendations related to best practice, research partnerships, cross-boundary training, and improved approaches to population monitoring, public awareness, and threat reduction.



Figure 1. Participants in the 2023 WIDECAS^T Annual Meeting held in Cartagena, Colombia.

2024 WIDECAS^T Annual Meeting

WIDECAS^T convened an Annual Meeting from March 11-12, 2024 in Heredia, Costa Rica. The meeting attracted more than 60 WCR sea turtle conservationists, marine scientists, educators, policymakers, program directors, and field biologists from 30 WCR nations and territories. Topics included Hawksbill Sea Turtle Trade,

Emerging Technologies, Research at Sea, Conservation & Protection Measures on Nesting Beaches, National Updates, Regional Conservation Updates, ShellBank, and Transboundary Initiatives. Results of the Annual Meeting included several recommendations related to best practice, research partnerships, cross-boundary training, and improved approaches to population monitoring, public awareness, and threat reduction.



Figure 2. Participants in the 2024 WIDECAS Annual Meeting held in Heredia, Costa Rica.

Northwest Atlantic Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) Regional Action Plan

Significant declines in leatherback turtles throughout our region triggered a multi-pronged response from the WIDECAS network, including a [Status Assessment](#) (2018), [Threat Assessment](#) (2021), and [Regional Action Plan](#) (2022), the latter supported by WWF, WIDECAS, and national management authorities in Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and Trinidad & Tobago. Key stakeholders throughout the region of interest (i.e., WCR with a focus on the Guianas and Trinidad & Tobago nesting populations, along with identified foraging areas and migration routes) provided input for the definition of priority actions and specific activities to address causal factors in the recorded decline of the NWA leatherback subpopulation in recent decades.

As part of the development process for the regional Action Plan, national and regional stakeholders defined four Strategic Lines as priority items necessary to address alarming declines in the NWA leatherback subpopulation. These Strategic Lines are: Legislation and enforcement; Protection and management of critical habitats; Community engagement; and Scientific data needs. Each Strategic Line is defined by Solution Components, each with a specific goal, multiple objectives, and various sets of Actions and Specific Activities to be performed over a period of five years (2023 to 2027). Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were also developed to aid in implementation of the Action Plan, each linked to the logical processes designed to achieve sustained recovery of the sub-population.

As this important initiative continues to take shape, WIDECAS is providing data, best practice guidance, and document review.

Caribbean Marine Megafauna and Anthropogenic Activities (CAMAC)

SPAW RAC gave a presentation on the CAMAC Project at the 2023 WIDECAS AGM. CAMAC aims at assessing the interactions between human activities (e.g., fisheries, marine traffic, tourism) and marine megafauna (sharks, sea turtles, marine mammals, seabirds) in the Caribbean and to strengthen cooperation among stakeholders of the region, in order to make recommendation so mitigate these interactions. The

CAMAC project focuses on the Lesser Antilles and the Guianas. It is planned for five years (2023-2028) and is organized in two phases and four work packages (WP). At the 2023 WIDECAS AGM, SPAW RAC held a stakeholder consultation session on CAMAC where the WIDECAS community identified project priorities. A report on this consultation entitled "Report of the CAMAC Workshop organized during the 2023 WIDECAS Annual Meeting" was prepared by Claire Pusineri and is attached.

In 2024, WIDECAS participated in the finalization of components of Work Package 1 which included a research report on hawksbill migratory corridors by [Maurer and Eckert](#) (2024) (WIDECAS Technical Report attached) and proposal development for Work Package 2 which focuses on sea turtle stranding response.

WIDECAS Country Coordinator Webinars

In October 2023, online thematic webinars included within this reporting period were in water surveys, in water tourism, photoidentification in sea turtles, genetics, illegal trade in sea turtle parts and products, oil spill response, sustainable financing and business planning, data applications, and blue corridors for sea turtles. The format for these webinars consists of individual presentations from invited expert speakers, with each presentation followed by a 15-minute question and answer period. The webinar concludes with an open forum where any topics can be covered or re-addressed as needed. Notes were taken for each session and included the general highlights of the discussion, including any specific recommendations for next steps, standardized approaches, funding, collaboration, etc. These notes were shared with the WIDECAS network. Agendas for the webinars that occurred during the reporting period are contained in Appendix I. These thematic webinars have been well-attended with very positive feedback.

WIDECAS Sea Turtle Medicine Veterinary Rounds

In 2022, one of the recommendations from the WIDECAS AGM Working Group on Sea Turtle Medicine was to hold regular discussions on sea turtle veterinary cases so that sea turtle treatment and rehabilitation efforts could be discussed and supported collectively as a group by sharing experiences and asking questions of each other. The first two sessions were held in May 2024 and July 2024. During the sessions, individuals presented specific cases and Dr. Norton, our WIDECAS Veterinary Medicine Advisor, was present to field questions on these cases. When there were no specific case submissions for discussion, various presentations on pertinent areas such as first response, venipuncture, fluid therapy, euthanasia were presented. These "Rounds" have been well-attended with very positive feedback.

Introduction to Sea Turtle Medicine Course

In 2023 and 2024 (May-July), registration for the online lectures offered in the Introduction to Sea Turtle Medicine Course at Ross University School of Veterinary was opened to WIDECAS Country Coordinators and their nominees. Lectures attended by WIDECAS representatives included Sea Turtle Biology and Natural History, Sea Turtle Husbandry, Nutrition, and Physical Exam, Sea Turtle Diagnostics, Sea Turtle Therapeutics, Sea Turtle Analgesia and Surgery, Sea Turtles – The Research Perspective, Sea Turtles - The Aquarium Perspective, Sea Turtle Infectious Diseases, and Fibropapillomatosis. More than 80 WIDECAS affiliates participated over the 2023-2024 offerings, meaningfully strengthening local capacity to care for sick and injured sea turtles.

Facilitation of Veterinary Training at Florida Keys Workshop

As a portion of WIDECAS's work to build sea turtle stranding response capacity and sea turtle veterinary capacity in the wider Caribbean region individuals are sponsored annually to attend the Florida Keys Sea Turtle Workshop hosted by The Turtle Hospital. In 2023 four attendees were sponsored by WIDECAS including Antonio Mignucci (Puerto Rico), Dr. Mandy Murti (St. Kitts, St. Kitts Sea Turtle Monitoring Network), Claire Dunning (British Virgin Islands), and Dr. Ralston Bent (Turks and Caicos). In 2024, seven individuals were sponsored by WIDECAS to attend and included Dr. Gabriella Dutra (Project TAMAR, Brazil), Dr. Jenelle Johnson (UWI School of Veterinary Medicine, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago), Ricardo Meade (El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation, Trinidad and Tobago), Sarah Persad (Nature Seekers, Trinidad and Tobago), Tanya Green-Elliott and Camar Green Clarke (Treasure Beach Turtle Group, Jamaica), and Ard Vreugdenhil (Sea Turtle Conservation Curaçao, Curaçao). In 2024 for the first time since WIDECAS has

Dr. Stewart delivered evening presentations for the public on “Methods for Identifying Individual Sea Turtles and Monitoring Sea Turtle Health” on both islands with over 120 individuals from the government and private sector in attendance. Her three field projects included teaching photo-identification and health assessment methods followed by in water sessions on both islands, as well as an additional beach session on St. Eustatius during which participants learned how to identify sea turtle nests and tracks following which participants participated in a beach clean-up and hike to view a fossilized sea turtle nest.

Participation in Sea and Learn not only allowed for sharing of research findings from sea turtle projects in St. Kitts and graduate opportunities at RUSVM but also facilitated the expansion of the citizen science program focused on photo-identification of sea turtles in St. Kitts and Nevis that was launched earlier this year by the SKSTMN through support from the French Embassy. This initiative affords participant’s enrollment in a free online course in photo-identification along with a cell phone/laptop-based reporting mechanism through which they can share images and contribute to ongoing research on sea turtle population health. Data gathered will enable scientists to estimate populations of subadult turtles that cannot be captured in water and to monitor progression and regression of diseases such as FP in sea turtle populations and participation in Sea and Learn has now resulted in expansion of this program to include sea turtles sighted in both Saba and St. Eustatius.



Figure 4. Participants in the 2024 Sea and Learn public presentation on Saba.

Marine Megafauna Guiding the Way to Improved Ocean Management Special Session at GCFI Annual Meeting in Guadeloupe

A Marine Megafauna Special Session was organized in partnership with WIDECAS, Caribbean Cetacean Society (CCS), SPAW-RAC, Birds Caribbean, and Caribbean Shark Coalition (CSC) which was held in conjunction with the 77th Annual Meeting of the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI). The session was funded by WWF-NL Caribbean Programme and Agoa Sanctuary (OFB in Guadeloupe). Carlos Diez, WIDECAS Country Coordinator in Puerto Rico, gave a keynote address on “Identifying Hotspots for Sea Turtle Conservation in The Greater Antilles, Including Offshore and Transboundary Marine Areas”. Within this

session a number of other presentations were delivered by WIDECAST Country Coordinators including Jamie Aquino (WIDECAST-Haiti, Haiti Oceans Project) and Jake Levenson (WIDECAST-Dominica, DomSETCo). Emma Doyle (WIDECAST Marine Protected Areas Advisor) represented WIDECAST in the panel discussion.

Other Activities and Concerns

The WIDECAST Network has been active on multiple fronts during this past biennium, with results that cannot be fully articulated in the space available here. These activities include maintaining a Regional Marine Turtle Tagging Centre at the UWI Cave Hill Campus in Barbados, the translation of sea turtle research and conservation documents to promote broader access across the WCR, the development of applications for data collection related to conservation and management objectives, the piloting of innovative approaches to lighting, bycatch reduction, and habitat restoration, and so on.

Transnational Contributions: WIDECAST Country Coordinators have made significant contributions to intergovernmental forums, including Ramsar, SPAW, and IAC (InterAmerican Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles). Contributions to SPAW are well known to the STAC, but perhaps less well known are our contributions to IAC, where WIDECAST experts sit on governance committees (often appointed from their countries as official representatives) and actively participate in working groups (e.g., climate change, leatherback subpopulation status, exemption policies). WIDECAST best practice documents are foundational to IAC deliberations, our Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plans (published as CEP Technical Reports) serve as a model for recovery actions endorsed by IAC Parties, and research and analysis conducted by WIDECAST and its partners have been the basis for Resolutions adopted by Parties calling for urgent, proactive action from Governments.

The WIDECAST network has meaningfully advanced regional initiatives spearheaded by WWF, especially its global program. These include [ShellBank](#) and the Blue Corridors for Sea Turtles Project both of which are part of the [WWF Global Marine Turtle Program](#). ShellBank is a DNA-based traceability toolkit that tracks and traces marine turtle populations globally. The Blue Corridors project, which started in July 2021, aims to protect important marine turtle populations, reduce unsustainable use and illegal trade, understand and mitigate bycatch impacts, and protect important marine turtle habitats. The project is led by WWF in partnership with SWOT, the University of Queensland, and CLS Argos..

Concerns: In addition to poaching/illegal fishing activity, unmonitored, open access legal seasonal fisheries targeting large juveniles and reproductively active adults (based on legislation with minimum size limits) undermine the conservation efforts and commercial sacrifices adopted and respected by range States that share migratory populations with SPAW Parties that have not, as yet, implemented SPAW's mandate to protect sea turtles year-round. While great progress has been made since the SPAW Protocol and its Annexes came into force more than three decades ago (e.g., 82% of all Central Western Atlantic nations and territories – from Brazil north to Bermuda – now ban sea turtle exploitation at all times), seasonal fisheries sanctioned by SPAW Parties continue to capture animals tagged from protected populations elsewhere. Because nesting populations are not only small (91% of all known WCR nesting beaches can be characterized in terms of abundance) but often declining, these fisheries deeply concern WCR conservation organizations, natural resource agencies, and fisher communities alike.

CLOSING REMARKS

WIDECAST is proud to serve the CEP with the support of SPAW-RAC, and to play a role in developing and implementing the tools necessary to fully realize the critically important objectives of the SPAW Programme.

REFERENCE MATERIAL

Appendix 1 WIDECAST Country Coordinator Thematic Webinar Agendas.

Barragan, A.B., J.A. Espín and R. Barragan. 2022. Northwest Atlantic Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) Regional Action Plan for the Wider Caribbean Region (K.L. Eckert, Editor). Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) Technical Report No. 22. Godfrey, Illinois. 71 pp.

Eckert, Karen and Katharine Hart. 2021. Threat Assessment: Northwest Atlantic Leatherback Sea Turtles, *Dermochelys coriacea*, with Special Emphasis on Trinidad & Tobago and the Guianas. WIDECAST Technical Report No. 21. Godfrey, Illinois. 159 pages.

Maurer, Andrew S. and Karen L. Eckert. 2024. Distributions of the Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) in the Western Atlantic Inferred from Satellite Telemetry. UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme, Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife Regional Activity Centre (SPAW RAC). WIDECAST Technical Report No. 23. Godfrey, Illinois. 35 pp.

Northwest Atlantic Leatherback Working Group. 2018. Northwest Atlantic Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) Status Assessment (Bryan Wallace and Karen Eckert, Compilers and Editors). Conservation Science Partners and the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST). WIDECAST Technical Report No. 16. Godfrey, Illinois. 36 pp.

Report of the CAMAC Workshop Organized During the 2023 Annual General WIDECAST Meeting, March 19-20, 2023, Cartagena, Columbia. Prepared by Claire Pusineri. 17 pp.

Appendix I WIDECAS T Country Coordinator Thematic Webinar Agendas, 2023- 2024

Agenda for In Water Surveys Meeting

Tuesday October 3rd, 2023

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur: Kimberly M. Stewart

(15 min) Techniques for studying marine turtles at feeding grounds: Carlos Diez, Endangered Species Program, WIDECAS T CC Puerto Rico

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) Standardized in-water surveys: determining abundance, growth rates and health status of foraging sea turtle populations: Kaj Schut, Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire, WIDECAS T CC Bonaire

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) Juvenile green turtles in Bermuda - The capture and release method: Gaëlle Roth, Veterinary Affiliate, Bermuda Turtle Project

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(20 min) Open Forum

(5 min) Closing Remarks: Kimberly M. Stewart

Agenda for In Water Tourism Meeting

Tuesday November 7th, 2023

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur: Kimberly M. Stewart

(15 min) Swim with me: Sea Turtle Ecotourism in Barbados: Carla Daniel, Barbados Sea Turtle Project, WIDECAS T CC Barbados

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) The Pros & Cons of Sea Turtles in Marine Tourism in Belize: Linda Searle, ECOMAR, WIDECAS T CC Belize

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) My Job Is Beach: In Water Ecotourism in St. Kitts: Mandy Murti, In Water Project Lead, St. Kitts Sea Turtle Monitoring Network, St. Kitts

(15 min) Discussion and Questions

(20 min) Open Forum Discussion: Paper Attached for Review and Discussion from Carlos Diez, Endangered Species Program, WIDECAS T CC, Puerto Rico (10 min);

Open Floor (10 min)

(5 min) Closing Remarks: Kimberly M. Stewart

Agenda for Photo-Identification Meeting

Tuesday December 5th, 2023; 3:00-5:00 pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAS T

(15 min) An Overview of Photo-Identification (PID) Use in Sea Turtle Ecology" Steve Dunbar, ProTECTOR Inc., WIDECAS T CC Honduras

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) Using Photo-ID to document and monitor the prevalence of fibropapilloma tumours in a foraging aggregation of green turtles Joana Hancock, Project Manager – Kenya, Olive Ridley Project

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) Sea turtle photo-ID: flipper vs head scales using APHIS Sophie Mills, Center for Marine Conservation Purdue University Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA and Cape Eleuthera Institute, Rock Sound, Eleuthera, The Bahamas

(10 min) Discussion and Questions 4:20-4:35 pm (15 min) Determining Sea Turtle Home Ranges Through Photo-Identification (PID) Techniques Steve Dunbar, ProTECTOR Inc., WIDECAS T CC Honduras

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(10 min) Open Forum Discussion 4:55-5:00 pm (5 min) Closing Remarks Kimberly M. Stewart, ED, WIDECAST

Agenda for Genetics Meeting

Tuesday January 9th, 2023; 3:00-5:00 pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

(15 min) Genetic techniques in sea turtle biology, Kelly Stewart, St. Croix Sea Turtle Project, The Ocean Foundation

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(1 hour) Open Forum Discussion and Questions

(10 min) Closing Remarks, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED, WIDECAST

Agenda for Illegal Trade in Sea Turtle Parts and Products

Tuesday February 6th, 2023; 3:00-5:00 pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

(15 min) How to recognize hawksbill products in the Costa Rica reality Didiher Chacón, Latin American Sea Turtles (LAST), WIDECAST CC Costa Rica

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(1 hour) Open Forum Discussion and Questions

(10 min) Closing Remarks Kimberly M. Stewart, ED, WIDECAST

Agenda for Sustainable Financing and Business Planning

Tuesday June 4th, 2024; 3:00-5:00 pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speaker and Rapporteur, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

(1 hr) Sustainable Financing and Business Planning, Emma Doyle, WIDECAST Marine Protected Areas Advisor

(50 min) Open Forum Discussion and Questions

(5 min) Closing Remarks, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED, WIDECAST

Agenda for Oil Spill Response

Tuesday July 9th, 3 to 5pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speakers and Rapporteur, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

(15 min) Oil Spill Preparedness and Response for Caribbean Volunteers, Marianne Hosein, Health Safety, and Environment (HSE) Consultant, Trinidad and Tobago

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(20 min) Preparedness and Response Strategies in Case of Oil Spills, Dr. Eduardo Cuevas, WIDECAST CC, Mexico

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(20 min) Use of Satellite Imagery to Track Spills, Nikia Gooding, Institute of Marine Affairs, Trinidad and Tobago

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(15 min) Open Forum Discussion and Questions

(5 min) Closing Remarks, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

Agenda for Data Collection Applications

Tuesday August 27th, 2024; 3:00-5:00pm AST

(5 min) Welcome and Introduction of Speaker, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST

(40 min) Earth Ranger, Jes Lefcourt, Director, EarthRanger

(10 min) Discussion and Questions

(1 hour) Open Forum Discussion on Data Collection Platforms and Experiences

(5 min) Closing Remarks, Kimberly M. Stewart, ED WIDECAST