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July 24, 1981 F/SEC5:LHO:meg

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FROM: F/SEC5 - Larry H. Ogren

SUBJ: Trip report -- travel to foreign country, Colombia, 15-26 June, 1981.

Purpose

Travel to Colombia to implement training program for standardized collection of sea turtle census and habitat survey effort for 1981 season. Meet with National Representative to Western Atlantic Turtle Symposium (WATS) in Bogota and discuss plans for assisting Colombia collect information, historical and current, on status of sea turtle stocks within their jurisdiction in the Caribbean Sea. Proceed to Atlantic coast, meet with their research (field) personnel, and conduct a survey of selected coastal areas.

Bogota, 16 June

- Reported in to U.S. Embassy, June 16, 1981 as directed in telegram to headquarters. Mr. Reynold Riemer, Economic Counselor, asked me to brief him on the project, our involvement with Colombian Government personnel, and level of funding we were providing to conduct the survey. After providing him with this information, he requested that I inform him of my survey plans after meeting with Colombian Government personnel. (On 20 July 1981, I called the Embassy before departing for Cartagena and left a message that the Colombian Fisheries Department of INDERENA was providing me with their aircraft to survey the coast.)

Bogota, 17-19 June

- For the remainder of the week I met with Dr. Jorge Hernandez, National Representative for WATS and INDERENA's leading authority on the natural resources of Colombia. He is recognized throughout that country for his interest and knowledge of the flora and fauna, as well as the geography and geology of that region.

Dr. Hernandez was very cordial and spent considerable time with me discussing the coastal region, its problems and the various impacts on the sea turtles extant today in Colombia. He recognized that no information, scientific or documented, exists for the status of the Pacific coast populations of sea turtles. However, he has several reports of possibly massed nesting by sea turtles occurring in the southern region below Buena Ventura. Additional reports state that these turtles are captured illegally and carried to Ecuador for processing and export. However, the priority area for surveys does not include Pacific beaches, and documentation of sea turtles nesting there will, hopefully, be done independently by Colombia.

There is no research effort or project directly related to their protection in INDERENA at the present time, and the last official effort to survey and protect nesting populations in the Guajira (Playa Buritaca) ended about 1975. Dr. Reinhart Kaufmann, German sea turtle specialist and marine biologist, formerly with the Instituto De Investigaciones Marinas De Punta De Betin (INVEMAR) at Santa Marta, "retired" from his post a few years ago and is now living in W. Germany. Therefore, Dr. Hernandez made arrangements for other departmental personnel to collaborate on implementing a coastal survey or providing contacts for me during the remainder of my stay in Colombia.

Accordingly, an official release from duties was obtained for Dr. Fernando Duque, marine biologist with INDERENA in Cartagena and the biologist I had met previously in October 1980. He and I had flown part of the coast and adjacent islands north and south of Cartagena. Also, the services of an INDERENA aircraft were obtained for an estimated 2-3 days or whatever time was required to survey the coast from Cartagena to the Panamanian border. We met with the pilot on 19 June to develop the itinerary and reschedule his flight plan for the following week.

In addition to these arrangements made by Dr. Hernandez, he also made tentative plans for me to fly the coast of the Guajira Peninsula on or about 1 July. An international consortium of foreign nationals are making plans to develop a deep water port at El Portete, in the northeastern part of the Guajira, and Dr. Hernandez is consulting with them in order to minimize adverse impacts to the mangroves and

fauna of the bay. A helicopter is used by the engineers of the port project at their camp site and would be available for our use.

I departed Bogota on 20 July for Cartagena to meet with Dr. Duque, make arrangements for the aerial survey and fly the survey beginning 22 July. Also, I was to go to Santa Marta at the end of the following week and get in contact with Dr. Hernandez regarding our plans to fly the Guajira coast on 1 July.

Cartagena, 20-22 June

- Met with Dr. Fernando Duque at the INDERENA Fisheries Laboratory in Bocagrande. Discussed itinerary for survey of coast from Cartagena to the Panamanian border in the Choco and from Cartagena north to the Rio Magdalena. Arrangements were made to pick up the pilot at the airport on Monday morning and fly that afternoon.

- Dr. Duque introduced me to the newly appointed laboratory Director, Dr. Rafael Amaya. He informed me of a study on the artisanal fishermen in the vicinity of Punta Canoas, 20 kms north of Cartagena. Edward Lasser, of the Peace Corps, is conducting the study, which includes information on turtle fishing and will prepare a report this summer (August).

- Other information on sea turtles is being collected in Turbo, on the Golfo De Uruba. An organization, CIMUR, does have a laboratory at Turbo, and I was advised to go there when flying to Panama. Sporadic nesting still occurs but, because of enforcement difficulties, many turtles are reported captured by the coastal artisanal fishermen of this area. Also, serious problems with widespread dynamiting of the reefs and adjacent areas by fishermen occur all along the Atlantic (Caribbean) coast. In many instances, dynamite is used to "capture" bait fish species which are then used by the hook-and-line fishermen for catching snappers and groupers.

- Aerial survey plans were unavoidably canceled when we were informed that no aviation gasoline was available on the coast. A distribution problem. The pilot had only enough fuel to return to Bogota, his area office. No one could say when fuel would become available -- next week perhaps.

- With permission from the laboratory Director, Dr. Amaya, a jeep and driver were made available. We then made plans to survey the coastal area between Barranquilla and Riohacha and visit all regional offices of INDERENA to obtain information concerning past sea turtle projects and current information on the status of stocks. Also included in this trip were surveys of the beaches within Salamanca National Park and Tayrona National Park -- both former sites of frequent sea turtle nesting.

Barranquilla - Santa Marta - Tayrona, 23-26 June

- Departed Cartagena via government jeep (Sr. Vicente Ballestas Antillo, Dr. Fernando Duque G., L.H.O.) 23 June. Arrived Barranquilla mid-day. Met with Dr. Nestor Mejia, Regional Director, Department of Magdalena. He provided us with information on what was Colombia's last effort to protect (and study) the sea turtles of Playa Buritaca and vicinity. Several reports were available on these "Operation Sea Turtle" activities. Dr. Reinhard Kaufmann was one of the original investigators in 1966-71, followed by Craig Tufts, a Peacecorpsman in 1972. INDERENA took over the research and protection in later years (1973-75). By the mid-1970's, nesting activity had declined to such a degree that the project was terminated. Dr. Mejia believed that the construction of the coastal highway, increase in shrimp trawling (incidental captures), killing of nesting females for ovarian eggs, and taking of eggs in nests resulted in a dramatic decline of all species that utilized these beaches.

- Continued survey of coastal area -- stopped at Salamanca National Park. Crocodiles (Crocodylus acutus) and Caimans (Caiman crocodilus fuscus) were held in captivity here and studies were in progress on age and growth and nutrition. A single live manatee was displayed in an open pond (others, held captive, had died from unknown causes). The extensive mangrove forest occupying a narrow 60 km zone between the beach and highway had been almost totally destroyed in 1978-79. The cause of the die-off has not been determined, but may have been the result of the hypersaline conditions that developed after the coastal highway, sans culverts, was constructed, flood control dams built along the Magdalena River and a severe drought that occurred in 1978. The effect this has had on the marine productivity of the area remains to be determined. However, the decrease in the avifauna, including North American migrants, was dramatic.

The beaches of Salamanca appeared satisfactory for sea turtle nesting. Indeed, early reports by fishermen did mention "frequent" nesting occurred here in the 1960's. By 1968 very few turtles nested here -- this was the year the area became a national park. The Ranger said the last nesting turtle he observed was in 1976. It was a Carey (Eretmochelys imbricata). Another turtle made a crawl that year but did not lay, nor was it identified. If the coastal populations of sea turtles could be recovered through protection, the Salamanca beaches could once again provide a nesting habitat -- perhaps an important factor to consider for the recovery of the Hawksbill (or Carey).

Santa Marta, Buritaca and Tayrona National Park 24-25 June

- Met with the INDERENA Regional Director of the Guajira at Santa Marta and the Director of INVEMAR at Punta De Betin. Received copies of earlier reports on the sea turtles of Buritaca and vicinity. Met staff members of the marine laboratory, La W. German - Colombia Scientific Foundation (non-Government), where Dr. Reinhard Kaufman had worked. Saw Dr. Reinhard's sea turtle pens where he had held loggerheads (or Tortuga Gogo) Caretta caretta captive.

Surveyed beaches of Tayrona National Park and Buritaca during day and night, but observed no turtles or turtle sign (all beaches were not surveyed, however). A roadside restaurant across from the park entrance was selling sea turtle eggs that were alleged to have been taken from a park beach. Cattle farmers were interviewed at Buritaca -- sea turtles still nest but if they are encountered, they are killed for meat. All nests are dug up and the eggs are sold. It appears that local populations of the green sea turtle (Chelonia mydas) and Hawksbill are almost completely depleted and the less desirable (for meat) and surviving species, the Loggerhead, may not withstand these exploitive pressures.

Photographs were taken of the various beach areas visited and copies of earlier reports were made and returned to the various offices. Some of the field biologists I contacted agreed to collect historical and current information of the sea turtles of their respective areas (or departments). Dr. Jorge Hernandez apparently was not able to arrange the aerial survey in the northeastern Guajira with the engineering company. My Government "escorts" drove me to Barranquilla and returned to their regular duties. I departed Colombia 26 June 1981.

A log, and photographs, of this trip and copies of reports are on file at the Panama City Laboratory. Recommendations for future research strategies in Colombia will be made to the WATS Secretary, as well as copies of all scientific reports. Difficulties in freely moving about waterfront, i.e., fish docks and other coastal areas precluded the collecting of various fisheries related information. These difficulties are primarily due to the heavy illicit drug traffic in the Barranquilla - Santa Marta - Riohacha area.

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