

**EXPERIMENT TO EVALUATE GEAR MODIFICATION ON RATES OF SEA TURTLE BYCATCH  
IN THE SWORDFISH LONGLINE FISHERY IN THE AZORES – PHASE 2**

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FINAL PROJECT REPORT  
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**BACKGROUND:**

The problem of sea turtle bycatch in longline fisheries has been recognized worldwide (for review, see Balazs and Pooley 1994, Bolten et al. 1996, Williams et al. 1996). Bolten et al. (1994) presented preliminary data on bycatch of loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*) in the swordfish longline fishery in the Azores. The waters around the Azores are an important developmental habitat for the juvenile oceanic stage of the Atlantic loggerhead population. Using mtDNA sequence analyses, Bolten et al. (1998) determined that the source rookeries for this oceanic population are primarily in the southeastern USA. Therefore, the nesting populations of loggerheads in the southeast USA are the primary populations impacted by the swordfish longline fishery in the Azores. Bjorndal et al. (2000, in press), using a length frequency model and skeletochronology, provided data on growth rates for this juvenile population and determined that the duration of the oceanic stage was 6.5 – 11.5 years depending upon the size at which the turtles departed the oceanic zone for the neritic zone (Figure 1).

A workshop (funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service, OPR) was held in Horta, Azores, Portugal, 2 – 4 September 1998, to review the impact of the swordfish longline fishery on sea turtles and to design an experiment to evaluate gear modification on longline bycatch rates of sea turtles (Bolten et al., 2000). This Workshop was attended by commercial longline fishermen from the Azores, fishery biologists from the Department of Oceanography and Fisheries at the University of the Azores, the Director of Fisheries from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in the Azores, and a representative of the Ministry of the Environment in the Azores. In addition, Jerry Wetherall (NMFS, Honolulu) participated and provided comparative information from other longline fisheries and ensured that the experimental design was statistically rigorous. Alan Bolten (ACCSTR, University of Florida), who has conducted sea turtle research in the Azores since 1989, convened the Workshop.

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of this project was to conduct an experiment to evaluate effects of gear modification on rates of sea turtle bycatch in the swordfish longline fishery in the Azores. Based on results from Phase 1 of this project (year 2000), the primary variables evaluated in Phase 2 of

the project (year 2001) was hook type and size: Straight J (Mustad # 76800 D 9/0), Circle (Mustad # 39960 ST 16/0), and Circle (Mustad # 39960 ST 18/0). Although the primary objective was to evaluate the effect of hook type on rates of sea turtle bycatch, the effect of hook type on the location of hooking (e.g., mouth vs. esophagus) was also evaluated. The location of hooking has very important implications for the survival of the hooked turtles. Effect of hook type on rates of catch for target species was also evaluated.

## **METHODS:**

A 25.4 meter commercial swordfish longline vessel (*Mestre Bobicha*) from the Azores was contracted to conduct the experiment in the waters around the Azores. The experimental design consisted of the following components:

- 60 sets were conducted in Phase 2 between 2 September 2001 – 6 December 2001 (approximately 20 sets per month).
- Buoy lines were 6-14 meters long, depending on sea conditions.
- There were 8 branchlines between buoys and 45 meters of mainline between each branchline.
- The branchlines were 14 meters long.
- Three hook types were tested in Phase 1: Straight J (Mustad # 76800 D 9/0), Offset J (Mustad # 76801 D 9/0) and Circle (Mustad # 39960 ST 16/0). Three hook types were tested in Phase 2: Straight J (Mustad # 76800 D 9/0), Circle (Mustad # 39960 ST 16/0), and Circle (Mustad # 39960 ST 18/0).
- There were approximately 1500 hooks per set; the number varied depending upon sea conditions (total hooks deployed for the 93 sets of Phase 1 = 138,121 [mean = 1485 hooks per set]; total hooks deployed for the 60 sets of Phase 2 = 88,150 [mean = 1469 hooks per set]).
- The hooks were individually alternated along the set (that is, A, B, C, A, B, C, A, B...). Since there were 8 hooks between the buoys, the relationship between the hook type and hook position on the gear varied.
- The bait was squid for all sets.

The experiment was conducted during the primary months of the swordfish fishery in the Azores. This time period was treated as one season with no seasonal effect.

Data collected for all turtles caught during the experiment included the following: species, body size (curved carapace length), status (dead, active, sluggish), manner of capture (entangled in line or caught on hook), type of hook, position of hook in the turtle, and position of hook between the buoys. Turtles were tagged with standard flipper tags before release. Small skin

samples were collected from all turtles for genetic analyses to monitor source rookeries impacted by this fishery.

Data collected on the fish species caught included the following: species, body size, hook type, and position between the buoys. Environmental parameters were also collected for each set.

## RESULTS:

- During Phase 1 of the experiment in year 2000, 237 turtles were captured in 93 sets (232 loggerheads, 4 leatherbacks, and 1 green turtle). Catch rate was calculated as 2.5 turtles per set (1.7 turtles per 1000 hooks). The number of loggerheads caught by each hook type is presented in Table 1. The loggerhead catch per 1000 hooks for each hook type is presented in Table 2. All 4 leatherbacks were caught entangled in the line, 2 on lines with straight J hooks and 2 on lines with offset J hooks. The green turtle was caught entangled on a line with a circle hook (16/0).
- During Phase 1, there was no significant difference among the 3 hook types in the number of loggerheads caught (exact binomial tests,  $p > 0.05$ ), although the lower number of turtles caught on the offset J hook approached significance ( $p = 0.0509$ ).
- During Phase 2 of the experiment in year 2001, 45 turtles were captured in 60 sets (44 loggerheads and 1 leatherback). Catch rate was calculated as 0.75 turtles per set (0.51 turtles per 1000 hooks). The number of loggerheads caught by each hook type is presented in Table 1. The loggerhead catch per 1000 hooks for each hook type is presented in Table 2. The leatherback was caught entangled on a line with a larger circle hook (18/0).
- During Phase 2, there was no significant difference among the 3 hook types in the number of loggerheads caught (exact binomial tests,  $p > 0.05$ ), although the higher number of turtles caught on the 16/0 circle hook approached significance ( $p = 0.0538$ ).
- Not all sets caught turtles; turtles were not uniformly distributed but were clustered within the fishing area. The frequency distributions of turtles caught among sets for Phases 1 and 2 are presented in Figure 2.
- The size frequency distribution of loggerheads caught during Phase 1 are significantly larger than the overall size distribution of loggerheads in Azorean waters (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test,  $ks = 0.6522$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Mean size of loggerheads caught during Phase 2 (54.7 cm CCL) is significantly larger than the mean size of those caught during Phase 1 (49.8 cm CCL; t-test,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The size range of loggerheads caught on longlines represents the largest turtles in the area (Figure 3).
- For Phases 1 and 2 combined, there was a significant difference among the hook types in the location of the hooks in the turtles (Chi-square = 60.33,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ): 60% of the loggerheads caught on J hooks were hooked in the throat compared with 9% of the

loggerheads caught on circle hooks (Table 3). This difference has important implications for sea turtle mortality.

- The effect of hook position along the mainline on turtle bycatch was not significant during either Phase 1 or Phase 2 (exact binomial tests,  $p > 0.05$ ; Table 4).
- The rate of turtles caught increased significantly as the hour of day of line retrieval increased ( $r^2 = 0.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Figures 4 and 5). The rate of fish caught remained constant as hour of day of line retrieval increased ( $p = 0.7$ ).
- The number of swordfish caught and the catch per 1000 hooks are presented in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.
- The number of blue shark caught and the catch per 1000 hooks are presented in Tables 7 and 8, respectively.

#### CONCLUSIONS:

- Experiments can be conducted successfully in the Azores with the commercial fleet, and the results can be exported to other regions and ocean basins.
- High turtle bycatch rate in the waters around the Azores allows for a rigorous experimental design and statistical analyses.
- Use of circle hooks significantly decreased the rate of throat hooking in loggerhead turtles. This result has important implications for reduced sea turtle mortality.
- Hour of day of longline retrieval had a significant effect on the rate of loggerhead turtles caught. Therefore, retrieval of the longline earlier in the day would reduce the interaction with loggerhead turtles.
- Gear modification has excellent potential to reduce sea turtle interaction and bycatch.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

We thank the captain and crew of the *Mestre Bobicha* for their cooperation and dedication to the success of this project. The Department of Oceanography and Fisheries of the University of the Azores provided essential logistic support.

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Table 1: The effect of hook type on the numbers of loggerhead turtles caught. There were 93 sets in 2000 (138,121 hooks) and 60 sets in 2001 (88,150 hooks). There was no significant difference among the 3 hook types within each year in the number of loggerheads caught (see text).

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	84	14
Offset J (9/0)	63	---
Circle (16/0)	85	21
Circle (18/0)	---	9
Total	232	44

Table 2: The CPUE of loggerheads per 1000 hooks for each hook type.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	0.61	0.16
Offset J (9/0)	0.46	---
Circle (16/0)	0.62	0.24
Circle (18/0)	---	0.10

Table 3: The effect of hook type on the location of the hook in the captured loggerhead turtles; data for Phase 1 and Phase 2 are combined. J style hooks had a significantly higher rate of throat capture compared with circle hooks (Chi-square = 60.33, df = 1,  $p < 0.0001$ ); 60% of the loggerheads caught on J style hooks were hooked in the throat compared with 9% of the loggerheads caught on circle hooks.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>External</b>	<b>Mouth</b>	<b>Throat</b>	<b>Total</b>
Straight J (9/0)	12	34	51	97
Offset J (9/0)	14	20	29	63
Circle (16/0)	12	85	9	106
Circle (18/0)	3	6	0	9

Table 4: Effect of hook position between the buoys on loggerhead capture during Phases 1 and 2. The position of the 8 hooks between each buoy were scored as: 1, 2, 3, 4, 4, 3, 2, 1; where position 1 was nearest the buoy. The effect of hook position was not significant (exact binomial tests,  $p > 0.05$ ) in either Phase 1 or Phase 2.

<b>Hook Position</b>	<b>Number of Loggerheads Phase 1</b>	<b>Number of Loggerheads Phase 2</b>
1	65	10
2	50	12
3	53	13
4	55	5

Table 5: Effect of hook type on the numbers of swordfish caught.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	382	203
Offset J (9/0)	341	---
Circle (16/0)	264	220
Circle (18/0)	---	137
Total	987	560

Table 6: Effect of hook type on swordfish CPUE per 1000 hooks.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	2.8	2.3
Offset J (9/0)	2.5	---
Circle (16/0)	1.9	2.5
Circle (18/0)	---	1.6

Table 7: Effect of hook type on the numbers of blue shark caught.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	733	896
Offset J (9/0)	600	---
Circle (16/0)	796	1619
Circle (18/0)	---	1476
Total	2129	3991

Table 8: Effect of hook type on blue shark CPUE per 1000 hooks.

<b>Hook Type</b>	<b>Phase 1 (year 2000) 93 sets – 138,121 hooks</b>	<b>Phase 2 (year 2001) 60 sets – 88,150 hooks</b>
Straight J (9/0)	5.3	10.2
Offset J (9/0)	4.3	---
Circle (16/0)	5.8	18.4
Circle (18/0)	---	16.7

Figure 1: Size-frequency distributions of oceanic-stage loggerheads captured in waters around the Azores (left-hand curves,  $n = 1692$ ) and neritic-stage loggerheads stranded in southeastern USA (right-hand curves,  $n = 1803$ ) (modified from Bjorndal et al. 2000, 2001). Percentages were calculated for each population. Dashed lines are cubic smoothing splines ( $df = 15$ ); vertical reference line is at the intersection of the two smooths at 53 cm CCL.

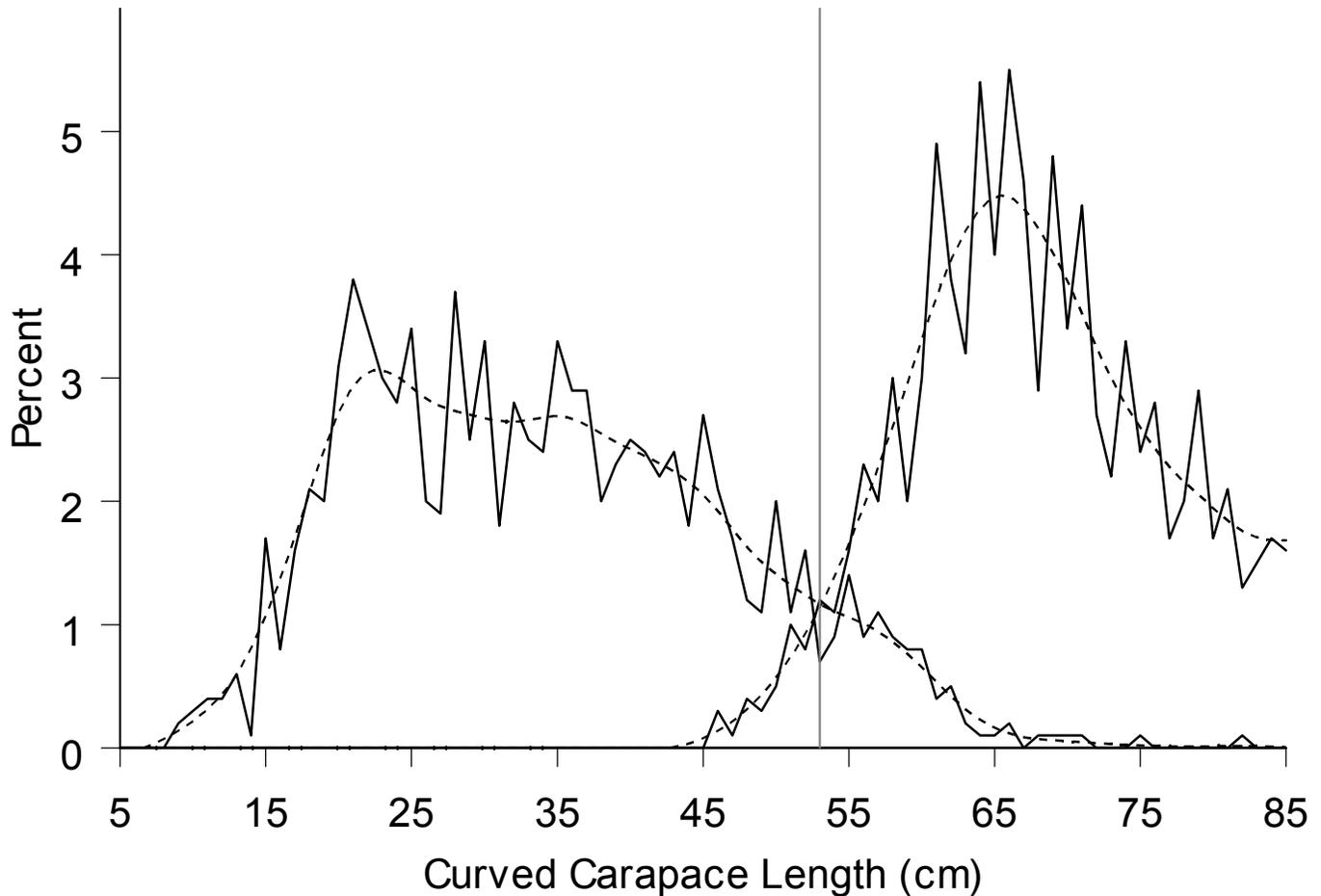


Figure 2: Frequency distributions of the number of turtles caught per set during Phases 1 (open bars) and 2 (solid bars).

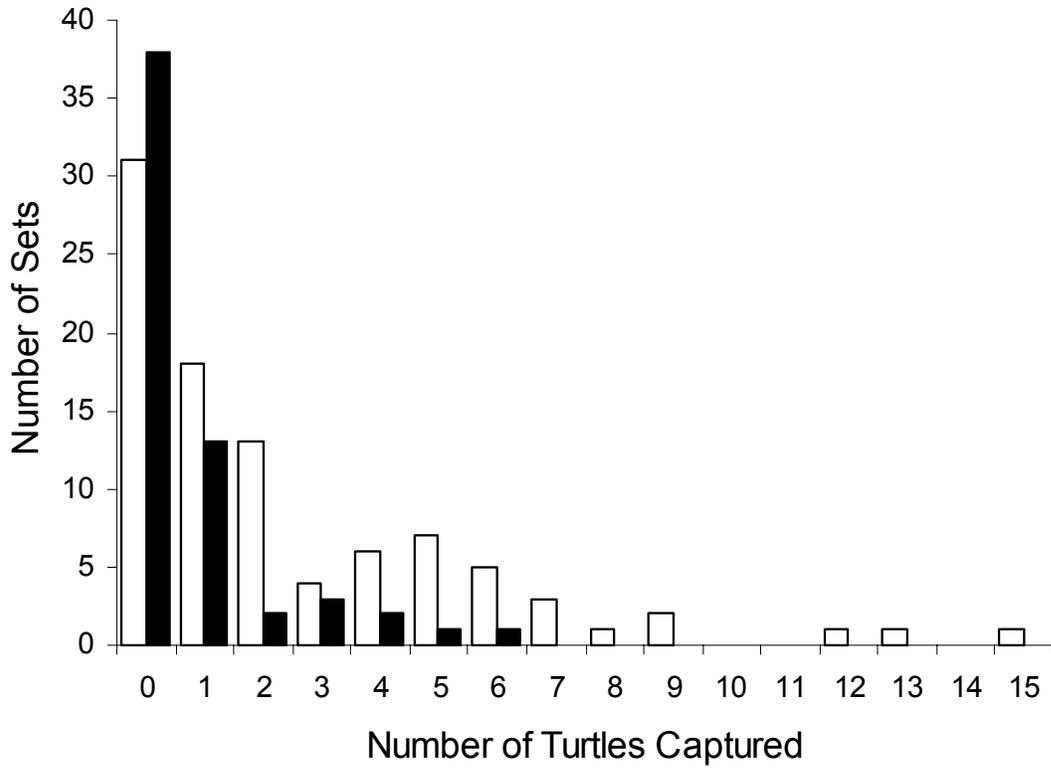


Figure 3: The size distribution of loggerhead turtles caught on the swordfish longline during Phases 1 (open bars) and 2 (solid bars) of the experiment compared with the overall size distribution of loggerheads in Azorean waters (gray bars, data from Bjorndal et al. 2000). The size frequency distribution of loggerheads caught during Phase 1 are significantly larger than the overall size distribution of loggerheads in Azorean waters (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test,  $ks = 0.6522$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Mean size of loggerheads caught during Phase 2 (54.7 cm CCL) is significantly larger than those caught during Phase 1 (49.8 cm CCL; t-test,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

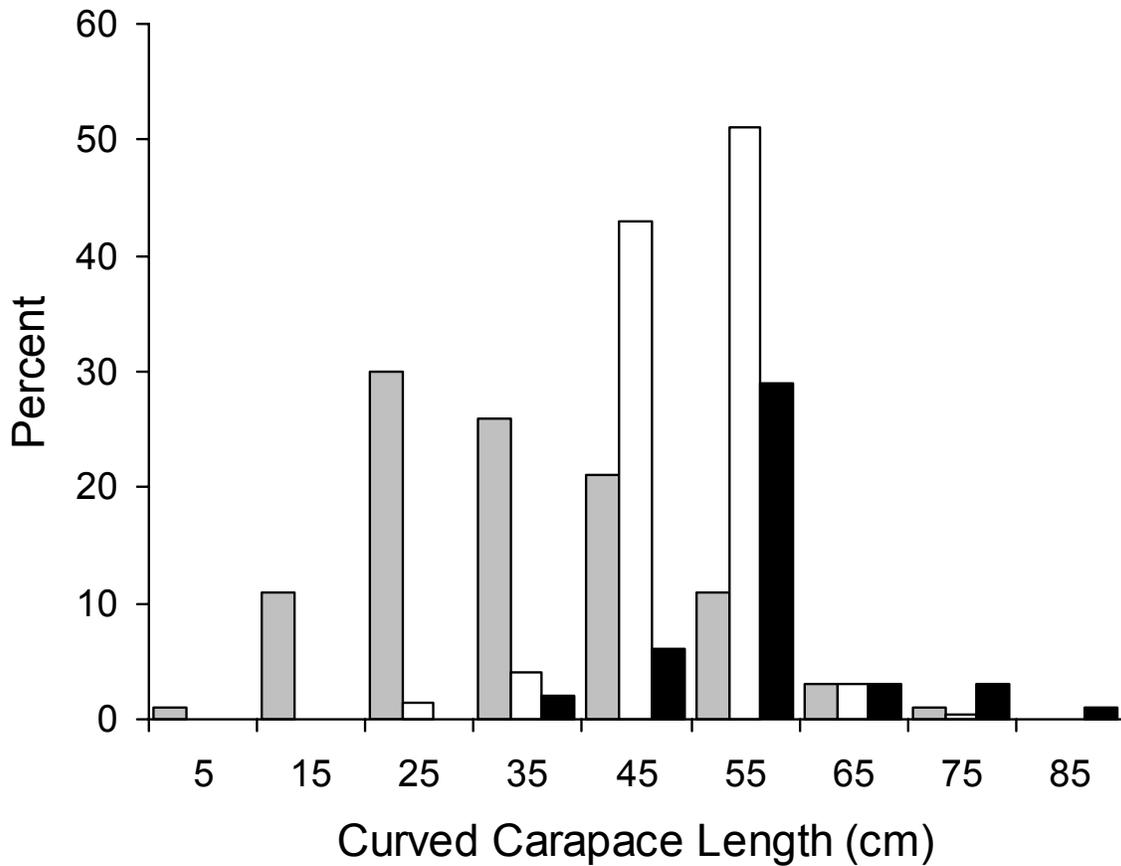


Figure 4: The relationship between both the rate of turtles caught and the rate of fish caught and the hour of day that the longline was retrieved during Phase 1 of the experiment in 2000. The rate of turtles caught increased as the hour of day increased (see Figure 5). The rate of fish caught remained constant as hour of day of line retrieval increased ( $p = 0.7$ ).

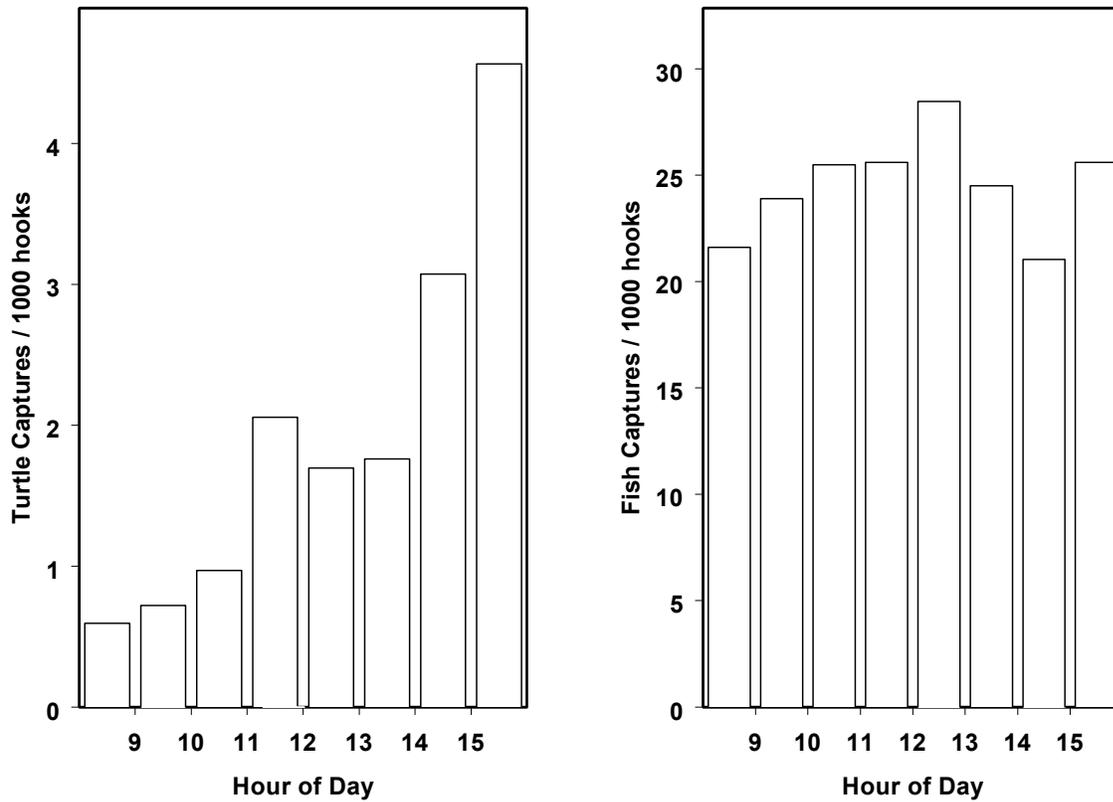


Figure 5: The relationship between the rate of turtles caught and the hour of day that the longline was retrieved during Phase 1 of the experiment in 2000. There was a significant effect in the rate of turtles caught as the hour of day of longline retrieval increased ( $r^2 = 0.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

