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Hawksbill Turtle Project Launches Second Survey on St. John

Researchers aim to collect crucial biometric and genetic data on the endangered species, with new satellite tagging to track migratory patterns

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Project researchers Scott Eanes and Dr. Alex Webb take samples of a hawksbill turtle found on the first day of the 2024 survey. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

ST. JOHN — Almost a year after the first survey near St. John, the Hawksbill Turtle Project began its second survey of the species in the area on July 1, collecting important data on the under-researched population.

Last year's study documented 17 hawksbill turtles over two weeks of field research in June and July of 2023. This year, the organization hopes to find some of the same turtles they came across during the initial study to evaluate their growth over the past year, as well as hopefully discover new hawksbills in the area.?

"Last year we saw three turtles in this facility and we caught two of them so we'd love to see the ones we didn't catch and the ones we did," Scott Eanes, founder of the project, told the Consortium during the first research day near Cruz Bay. Mr. Eanes said he hopes to capture the biometric data of the young turtles found in the previous year so that he and his team can compare their sizes and other biometric data a year onwards.?

Researchers also record the turtles' genetic data, which reveals their geographic origin. New this year will be the marking of turtles with satellite tags to track the turtle's migratory journey and provide further information on their country of origin.?

"It's more invasive but it's more rewarding," Mr. Eanes said about the project's research procedure, which involves capturing the turtle from the ocean and collecting physical samples from the turtle on the project's boat. The process takes nearly an hour for each turtle. For Mr. Eanes, the rewarding aspect of the taxing process, which includes hours of free diving, swimming, and sample collecting, is the data that the team collects on the "critically endangered species." Hawksbills are estimated to be at 1% of their historic population level and are critical to the health of coral reefs, removing prey from the reef's surface and making it easier for fish to feed.

"It's physically harder to do so it's a really understudied gap," said Dr. Alex Webb, another researcher with the project, comparing their in-water research to the more commonly conducted nesting research. The project, founded in 2022 and based in the U.K., aims to protect the species by providing funding and support to smaller projects as well as conducting their own research. "We're trying to help organizations that don't do it start to do it," Dr. Webb explained. In 2022, the Hawksbill Turtle Project raised \$12,000 to aid Ocean Spirits, a research partner with the University of the Virgin Islands Sea Turtle Research and Conservation, in conducting the first in-water assessment of the population of turtles near the island of Carriacou. According to the project, the study "can be used as a baseline study for the island and allow the local Grenadian government to make informed decisions."?

While hunting endangered turtles has been outlawed by many Caribbean governments for decades, Mr. Eanes and Dr. Webb say the effects of poaching are still seen today, and have significantly decreased the hawksbill population.

"Because the Danish and the British are so good at keeping recordings you can trace them taking hawksbills from St. Thomas in 1690, so it's been hundreds of years of this – which is why there aren't as many as we'd like," Mr. Eanes said. With the collected data, the project hopes to produce similar expansive records as those of centuries past.

In creating baseline data sets for the under-researched and endangered species, Mr. Eanes said that the support of St. Johnians and the territory at large is critical. "This is really a community project," he noted. Friends of Virgin Islands National Park has funded 60% of the project, and Love City Lofts has donated housing for the researchers for their first week in Cruz Bay. Additionally, Concordia Eco Resort has offered to provide housing for the second week, and The Tap Room has donated \$300 to the project.

Residents are encouraged to participate in the study by taking photos of Hawksbill turtles spotted near St. John and [sending them to the team](#). "We would absolutely love any and all turtles," Mr.

Eanes said. According to Eanes the large community support that the project has already received is because “everybody loves turtles.” “It’s not a hard sell,” he added.

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