

# VELADOR

Science-Based Sea Turtle Conservation Since 1959

Issue 1, 2022



## Highs and Lows for Leatherbacks in Panama

Leatherback turtle returns to the Caribbean Sea after nesting. Photo credit: Karla Morales.

It's been a roller coaster ride of news regarding leatherback turtles in Panama over the last year. Since annual monitoring of nests at Soropta Beach began in 2002, the highest number of leatherback nests recorded was 792, which occurred in 2019. That was the record, until the 2021 nesting season, when STC documented 1,484 leatherback nests—nearly twice the previous record high. This explosion of nesting is very encouraging

are producing measurable results. Leatherbacks take a minimum of 20 years to reach reproductive maturity, and it is no coincidence that conservation  
The dramatic increase in nesting may very well be Soropta that survived to reach adulthood following

*continued on page 2...*

*Inside: Dedication of New Panama Research Station*



*Adopted Green Turtles Return to Tortuguero*

... from cover

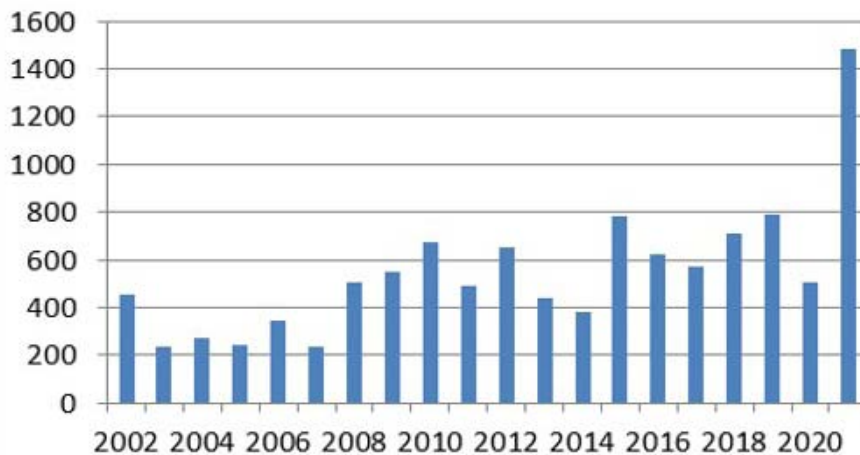
the initiation of a permanent conservation program at this beach.

While STC celebrates this success, we are simultaneously alarmed about a significant increase in the rate of illegal egg harvesting. Even with the presence of STC's teams of biologists and nest surveyors patrolling Soropta Beach at night, we've always observed a small percentage of nests being taken by poachers—who take the eggs to sell locally on the black market. But we were unprepared for what we saw in 2021. The clandestine egg hunters were on the beach every night of the nesting season, seemingly taking every nest they could find. By the end of the season, over 40% of the nests we tracked had been taken. A lack of law enforcement presence on this remote beach, combined with the economic hardships of a two-year-long pandemic, exacerbated a problem that had been simmering for years. Even when STC began relocating and hiding nests that our teams found first, the poachers were so relentless that they even found and took many of the relocated nests.

As the 2022 season gets underway, STC is implementing a three-pronged approach to curtail this illegal activity so our years of conservation work are not undone. As an immediate step, we are constructing a hatchery next to our station where we can relocate and protect as many nests as possible. STC views hatcheries as an option of last resort; unfortunately, we have reached that point at Soropta. The idea is to use the hatchery only long enough to see the threat of poaching reduced to a manageable level, which hopefully will occur within a few nesting seasons.

At the same time, STC has arranged to provide logistical support to local enforcement agencies in order to increase the frequency of beach patrols. We are constructing a four-person bunk house at our field station that will be used during the nesting season by local authorities—providing them with a base of operations for increased nest protection at this remote beach. We learned that one of the obstacles for these agencies to conducting patrols at Soropta has been the lack of a base where guards can

## Total Leatherback Nests at Soropta Beach, Panama



## VELADOR {bel.a.dor}

In Caribbean cultures, *Velador* translates as "one who stands vigil" —referring to turtle hunters who waited at night for turtles to come ashore. STC claims this title for its newsletter, and around the world STC's researchers and volunteers are replacing poachers as the new veladors. The *Velador* is published for Members and supporters of the nonprofit **Sea Turtle Conservancy**. STC is dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles through research, advocacy, education and protection of the habitats upon which they depend.

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sleep and be fed. STC is providing free lodging and prepared meals for the guards, so they can maintain a visible presence on the beach going forward.

The third, and perhaps most essential, prong in our strategy to curtail egg harvesting is to increase our community outreach efforts in nearby communities. STC already hires and trains local community members to assist with the monitoring work, but, clearly, we need to do more to connect with communities, find common ground, and help promote the vision of a healthy and robust leatherback nesting colony, that can draw eco-tourists and generate sustainable revenue for the community. It's a model that has worked for over six decades in Tortuguero, Costa Rica, and it will work in Soropta too. 🌀



Leatherback hatchling in Soropta. Photo credit Ben Hicks.

## Lighting News

### Q&A with Chris Kopp: The Town of Longboat Key's Lone Code Enforcement Officer

Florida's sea turtles face a number of threats to their survival – coastal development, poor water quality, ingestion of marine debris, artificial lighting – but they also have a lot of people in their corner that fight to protect them. Among these people are coastal code enforcement officers who survey the lighting on beachfront properties during sea turtle nesting season and work with coastal property owners to comply with their local ordinances. Because the State of Florida leaves it up to individual counties and municipalities to adopt and enforce their own sea turtle lighting ordinances, local government officials are on the front lines of protecting their local sea turtle populations from disorientation by lights.

This task is not for the faint of heart. Although sea turtle nesting season occurs mostly during the summer months, code enforcement officers spend the winter preparing their communities for nesting season by sending out reminders to turn off lights or use sea turtle friendly lighting, compiling violation data, conducting pre-season lighting surveys, and tending to other code enforcement-related responsibilities that don't involve their sea turtle lighting ordinances. In addition, a code enforcement officer's coastal territory often covers several miles

and dozens of coastal properties – all with potentially problematic lighting that needs to be addressed. Some officers utilize off-road vehicles at night to cover the extensive stretches of beach, while others conduct their lighting surveys by foot.

Chris Kopp, the only code enforcement officer for the Town of Longboat Key, prefers the latter method. His survey area is 11 miles long and hosts the second-highest number of disorientations in Florida. He recently spearheaded the effort to update the Town's sea turtle lighting ordinance to reflect the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's new Model Lighting Ordinance and regularly assists code enforcement officers across the state with doing the same. Below, we talk with Chris about how he manages his time as a department of one, his enforcement style, and his favorite sea turtle experience.

#### *What is your education and career background?*

I am Florida born and raised. I have over 20 years of combined military, law enforcement, and code enforcement experience. I served two tours on active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps. In 2007, I began my enforcement career with the Margate Police Department in Florida, before transferring to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina. In 2019, I turned my part time gig of teaching active shooter survival into a full-time business with Lockdown International. In 2020, I returned to

Florida as the Code Enforcement Officer for the Town of Longboat Key. I hold a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice Administration and several advanced certifications in the enforcement fields.

**How did you end up as a code enforcement officer on Longboat Key?**

I was looking for a career opportunity which allowed me to use my professional experience and desire to work with the community in public service. The Town of Longboat Key was always a beautiful place to visit during family vacations. Longboat Key gives you that small town feel with big cities amenities all around. Code Enforcement on Longboat Key checked all those boxes for me and my family.



**What role do you play as code enforcement during sea turtle nesting season?**

The Code Enforcement Division handles every aspect of sea turtle protection during nesting season. We write the ordinance, present ordinance changes to the Town Commission, educate the public on the ordinance, inspect properties for compliance, work toward voluntary compliance with property owners, issue citations, and even take property owners to a Special Magistrate Hearing. A lot of our work happens outside of sea turtle nesting season. Citations and Magistrate Hearings are always a tool for enforcement, but don't always produce the best long-term results. If we can properly educate and prepare the community prior to the nesting season, then our violations tend to decrease. Our goal is to educate the community on why the rules exist, and work with violators to gain full compliance for the safety of sea turtles.

**As you often say, you are a department of one. How do you manage all of the responsibilities of an entire department, especially during the height of nesting season?**

Time management and community involvement are crucial in this position no matter the size of the department. However, I am not alone during the nesting season. Longboat Key Turtle Watch has a

wonderful team of volunteers assisting our local FWC permit holder, Mote Marine Laboratory, with the daily morning monitoring of turtle nests. These volunteers provide outstanding communication about potential lighting and obstruction violations they observe. I also receive every FWC Marine Turtle Disorientation Report within 24 hours. All this information helps me focus my time in the needed hot spots.

**What was the impetus for Longboat Key's ordinance update and what was the process like?**

There were a number of driving factors which caused the Town to update our Marine Turtle Protection Ordinance, with the biggest factor being our number of disorientations. It pains me to say that our Town has had the second highest number of disorientations in the entire state for years. We are not proud of this, and we are striving to change it. Other factors included the advancements in sea turtles research, the advancements in lighting technology, our increasing population, and other minor verbiage changes long overdue. The process was not as simple as making a couple of changes and applying the ceremonial rubber stamp. Each word in the ordinance can potentially affect sea turtles, our citizens, and other community stakeholders. We were calculated in our changes to ensure it was in everyone's best interest. We had long discussions with our residents, our businesses, attorneys, lighting experts, window manufactures, tinting engineers, and our partners in sea turtle protection, including STC. We wanted to get the entire community involved in creating an effective ordinance. It was an eight-month process, and we are proud of our final product.

**How do you approach enforcing Longboat Key's ordinance?**

Voluntary compliance is the goal for every code enforcement officer. Once a violation is observed, we attempt to make an in-person or over-the-phone meeting. Many property owners in violation

don't know they are violating an ordinance. We want to educate them on the ordinance, how they are violating it, and how to come into compliance. This method also provides a much quicker compliance rate than using snail mail. The type of violation (i.e. lighting, furniture left on the beach, etc.) will determine our enforcement options. Items left on the beach can be tagged for removal or impounded. Citations can be written for each day a violation exists. A Notice of Code Violation letter may be mailed to the property owner which starts a legal process toward a Special Magistrate Hearing. A Magistrate can then assess fines in the form of liens. We have used all methods to enforce our Marine Turtle Protection Ordinance.

***What has been your most challenging sea turtle lighting case or violation that you've handled?***

We have a repeat offender who continues to have lighting violations. The property is a short-term rental, owned by an out-of-state company. Zero communication from the company. We observe a violation, inform the renters about the ordinance, and then a week later a new renter arrives. We then observe another violation, inform the new renter about the ordinance, and you get the picture. We have issued numerous citations and have an active lien on the property. Not all violations have a success story. The other 99% of my interactions have positive, successful endings.

***What do you think is the best part of your job?***


The community. Community services was my specialty during my time in law enforcement. It is what I enjoy most – the interaction with everyone. No one wants to see the Code Enforcement Officer

at their door or receive a violation in the mail. I understand my job from their perspective. I try to provide each person with some education, a smile, and some light humor.

***Tell me about a meaningful sea turtle experience you've had.***

Watching a massive sea turtle lay eggs or hatchlings exploding out of the nest like a bag of Jiffy Pop is just really cool to see. I am fortunate to see these things happen during nighttime inspections. I was able to rescue a couple of hatchlings trapped in the vegetation roots and being eaten by ants. The hatchlings were rehabilitated by Mote Marine Laboratory and released. It puts into perspective the "why" for me and my job responsibilities.

***What advice do you have for code enforcement officers in coastal counties who want to implement lighting ordinance updates?***

Your abilities as a Code Enforcement Officer are only as good as your ordinance is enforceable. Your ordinance needs to stay current with sea turtle research, lighting technology, and recommendations by our partners at the state level. The Model Lighting Ordinance was released as Florida Administrative Code 62B-55 on December 17, 2020. Does your ordinance reflect their recommendations? If not, then it's time to update your ordinance. We are a brotherhood and sisterhood in the fight together. I've assisted other jurisdictions with updating their ordinances. Let me be a resource for you. My email is [ckopp@longboatkey.org](mailto:ckopp@longboatkey.org). 

***By Stacey Gallagher***  
*Lighting Specialist & Development Coordinator*

## ***Panama Update***

### **Dedication of the Chencho Castillo Sea Turtle Research Station**

*The following article was written for The Velador by Drs. Anne and Peter Meylan, long-time research associates of the Sea Turtle Conservancy. During 2021, STC and the Meylans worked together to*

*raise the funding and local approvals required to construct a new sea turtle research station on Small Zapatilla Cay near Bocas del Toro, Panama. The Zapatilla Cays, two small islands situated within the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park, are the site of a long-term research and protection program first initiated by the Meylans in 1987. The work continues today through a partnership with STC.*

Since 1987, our project in Panama, the Ecology and Migrations of Sea Turtles in Bocas del Toro



The new Chencho Castillo Research Station with dedication banners hanging.

Province, has been facilitated by a former turtle fisherman and “velador,” Chencho Castillo, and his family. Chencho taught us how to catch sea turtles safely for research purposes. He showed us the best locations and methods for setting nets and took us into his family homes, first in Secretary in the Chiriquí Lagoon and then later in the Zapatilla Cays (now part of Bastimentos Island National Marine Park). He became the dueño (local leader) of our project and slowly but surely gained a reputation throughout the Bocas coast as a sea turtle conservationist. The house that he used when he worked on his coconut farm on the Small Zapatilla Cay became our turtle camp, and we used it every year from 1990 through 2020. His sons and nephews helped with the research almost every year.

Starting in 2018, we worked with Chencho’s youngest son, Sebastian, and the staff of MiAmbiente (Panama’s environmental ministry) to obtain permission to rebuild Chencho’s camp as a sea turtle research station. We could only do this because Sebastian had preserved family papers showing a right of occupation for the coconut farm that existed before the establishment of the marine park. In early 2021, we received final permission to rebuild the camp as a sea turtle research station.

The new station was built by Arcelio Gonzalez Hooker, who has worked as a turtle monitor and coordinator for the project since 2006, with help from many of the other monitors who spend half the year patrolling beaches. On November 7, 2021, the two of us (Annie and Peter Meylan), STC Research Coordinator Cristina Ordoñez, and other members of the STC staff, and a large group of

beach monitors and other community members, including representatives of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and MiAmbiente, traveled to Small Zapatilla Cay to formally dedicate the new, two-story field station.

The new facility has been named: “Estación de Investigación de Tortugas Marinas Chencho Castillo.” It will serve as headquarters for researchers and beach monitors, including members of the indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé community and international students, to continue daytime and nighttime patrols that document nesting effort and nest productivity in the Zapatilla Cays. Construction of the new field station was authorized by our colleagues at MiAmbiente who have jurisdiction over protected areas and have played a key role in protecting the park’s resources, especially sea turtles.



Arcelio working with a daytime nesting hawksbill turtle.

Bastimentos Island National Marine Park was one of the first national marine parks with sea turtle protection as one of its primary goals. Funding for the new station was provided by many donors, including the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Coastal Wildlife Club of Florida, the Lemmon Foundation, Only One/Sea Legacy and STC members. A formal announcement of the dedication will also appear in the conservation journal ORYX in March 2022. In a few months, a bronze plaque will be installed permanently commemorating the dedication and Chencho’s contribution to sea turtle conservation. 🌊

**By Drs. Anne & Peter Meylan**  
STC Research Associates

# Adopted Turtles Return to Tortuguero

Each year from July to September, STC researchers tag and collect data on green turtles that nest on the beaches of Tortuguero, Costa Rica. Many of these turtles are “adopted” by individuals or families in a symbolic show of support for STC’s work. If a turtle that you or your family sponsored was observed on the beach during the 2021 nesting season, your name(s) will appear below:

Jay and Beth Adams	Angela Davis	Camden, Addie & Finley Johnson	Nevena Natum
Melodye Adkins	Alice de Jong	Kimberly Marie Judith Espina	Alexandra Nelson
Adventures by Disney	Sue De Silva	Nathalie Kelm	Manuel Neumann
Lynn Anoai	Ocean Blue Demuth	Kent & Brenda	Nisette
Christian Baader	Eleanor Desjardins	Kristen Kephart	Tania & Marie Noelle
Allison Baccala	Dehina Diem	Saya & Sianna Khandhar	Benjamin Northcott
Cassidy Barbour	Zach & Nomi Dietsch	Austin Kingsbery	Beth Novick
Tom & Monieu Bastiaansen	Michael Downs	Jackson Klim	Jeffrey O’Neil
Mariette Batenburg	Stacey Dresser	Brett Kolmetz	MaureenPage
Ericka Bauman	Emilie Duclaux	Pam Koski	Jamye Pankiw
Cameron Bespolka	Makenna Elizondo	Hugo Kurth	Nancy Parker
Hamda Bin Mejren	Dina & Hunter Elkins	Max Kutten	Bill Parson
Bischof Family	Eric Eng	Susan Kuveke	Betty Payne
Mathieu BLANC	Familia Martinez Quesada	Emily Lacy	Mary Perez Lopez
Selene Blanchard	Giancarlo Farinelli	Rinie Lamers	Joe Perino
Niels en Sifra Bochoven	Christen Fencl	Claudia Langemeyer	Theresa Peterson
Frank Bolker	Madeline Flinn	Gabriel & Jonah Lawrence	Cheryl Petyo
Ursula Borkenhagen	Macy Flowers	Katie Lear	Janine Pitta
Cedillia Bornat	Bert Foehly	Donald Lee	Emma Plettig
Kim Bousquet	Fox Travel	Marilyn Lister	Anna Potts
Jade Bowman	Fox Travel	Isabel & Preston Long	Charlotte & Richard Powell
Alison Brawner	Fox Travel	Laura Longacre	Allan Prang
Didier Brocher	Bill & Arielle Frazier	Kevin Loo	Noe Prevel
Bryce Bullock	Ella Friedman	Robert & Mary Ann Lowe	Fernando Quintela
Morgen Burton	Pam Garrett	Shelby Lowery	E W Ramakers
Cactus Tours	Ed Gierth	Nano Lutfi	Grace Read-Giummule
Linda & Rod Callison	Jeff Goldberg	Robert Lynch & Family	Nick Rettino
Emily Cantrell	Diane Goldman	Brook Lynn	Elaine Richardson
Liza-mae Carlin	Lew & Sylvia Gollub	H. Maas	Tim & Abby Rodham
Ava Carter-Meo	Philip Goodwin	Macifiens	Lorraine Runyan
Cathy & Hannah	Yoshikatsu Goossens	Michael Marchant	Robert Sari
Ella & Jonah Cayette	Annie Gosse	Scott & Pam Markham	Missy Scavongelli
Rita Chambers	Warren & Donna Grant	Peta Martin	Judith Schartmann
Wilson Chan	Charlotte Gribble	Nolin & Patricia Mauriel	Sunhild Schlechta
Breana Chappell	Fox Groep	Kelly McCann	Schuivens
Homer Chin	Margaret Guild	Robert Mac McIntosh	Jessica Shaklee
Nichole Christine	Sarah Guillaume	Lisa McWhorter	Brian Shea
Cleveland Family	Kaj Gumbs	Leonie Mercier	Syuan-Zih Shen
Abby Colarusso	Aubry Hamrick	Juliette Mermoud	Jan Snider
Kathie & Joe Colarusso	Darwin Harris	Kari Middleton	Hernan Solano Hernandez
Hilda Colondres	Lukáš Hartych	Fritz Miller	Simone Spousel
Josephine Costa	Kelsi Hazledine	Shirley Anne Montgomery	Camille Stang
Camden & Harrison Covey	Marieke Heinsbergen	Susan Moon	Trisha Steele
Jennifer Crow	Carol Herbertson	Lyle Morris	Melanie Stein du Pre
Samuel Danby	Wendy Hickman	Jordan Morris	Julia Steiner
Ian Daniels	Anita Hornback	Joshua Moultrie	Heidi Stephan
Christine Datu	Dave Hugo	Lorna Mueller	Suzanne Stewart
Andrea Daube	Paxon Jacobson	Milind Mukkamala	Rebecca Stubley
Tobi Sue Davis	Neena Jair	Julia Munster	
Mike Davis	Carla Jimenez Palmieri	Aisha Nash	

*List continued on back...*



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## *Adopted turtles continued...*

Jessica Tai  
Martika & Jamiro Tanihatu  
Ann Tannen  
Sarah Tedford  
The Sisterhood  
Mollie Thomas  
Elena Tincau  
Kyla and Austin Tomlinson  
Peter & Yvonne Toonstra  
The Towzey Family  
Leah Trunsky  
Kattia Valverde Monge  
Diane Van der Kooij

Patricia Van Hoorn  
Veronika Varga  
Grace Vaughn  
Lucas Verner  
Brady Vetrano  
Britta Voss  
Anthony Waite  
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