

The Desbarras Sea Turtle Watch Community-Based Management Initiative Moving Forward

Grande Anse Estate, located in the northeast of Saint Lucia, is a former agricultural estate. It covers approximately 2000 acres and much of this area remains wild. The plant life ranges from cliff side cacti to the tropical scrub forests on the adjacent hillsides. The area is rich in wildlife and is particularly important to migratory and endemic birds such as the Saint Lucia Warbler, Saint Lucia Nightjar, White Breasted Thrasher, Saint Lucia Oriole and Saint Lucia Wren. This diversity also includes endemic reptiles such as the Saint Lucia Boa Constrictor, Fer-de-lance snake and the Saint Lucia Anole. It is also an important habitat for the endangered iguana.

Grande Anse beach and associated mangroves was designated a marine reserve in 1986. This beach is recognised as one of the largest known leatherback turtle nesting sites in the Eastern Caribbean. However, other species are known to nest there as well, but at lower frequencies, including the hawksbill turtle and the green turtle.

Turtle watching has been conducted on the Grande Anse beach for more than a decade, every Saturday from about March to August, under the direction of the Saint Lucia Naturalists' Society, a non-governmental organisation and the Department of Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. This initiative has now been expanded to several days a week (client-dependent), under the supervision of a group from the adjacent community of Desbarras, in a manner that allows members to earn a living by sharing the turtle nesting experience with local and visiting guests, while actively participating in the conservation of sea turtles. The Desbarras Turtle Watch Project was officially launched in April 2001, recognised as an official Heritage Tourism Site (under the St. Lucia Heritage Tourism Project).

The Project, while still in its early stages, has already shown signs of success. Community members are developing a sense of pride and ownership in being involved in turtle conservation and imparting knowledge to visitors about sea turtles and their country as a whole. The turtle data collection component assists the Department of Fisheries in the monitoring of one of the major nesting beaches on the island, especially in terms of the leatherback turtle. Data collected are submitted to both the Departments of Forestry and Fisheries for analysis and are also fed into regional databases such as that of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network, being coordinated from Barbados. The Group has expressed interest in assisting with turtle monitoring work in other parts of the island and members are keen to see the Grande Anse tour expand to include other aspects, such as bird watching. They have also lent assistance to groups from other communities who wish to emulate their work and have assumed the responsibility of maintaining the cleanliness of the Grand Anse beach. In addition and noteworthy, is the fact that illegal harvesting of nesting females and their eggs on the Grande Anse beach has been considerably reduced and illegal sand mining is significantly deterred. The reduction in sand mining is not only important in terms of nesting sea turtles, but the endangered iguana, which can be found in the area, also uses the beach sand to lay its eggs.

The Departments of Forestry and Fisheries, the Heritage Tourism Programme, the Saint Lucia Naturalists' Society and the Saint Lucia National Trust continue to lend technical, financial and administrative assistance to the Group. The Department of Fisheries anticipates that a workshop will be conducted with the Group towards the end of this year's turtle nesting season to discuss a number of issues pertinent to the operation of the Group including among others: a system of surveillance by police authorities, given the remoteness of the area; a revised management agreement and guidelines for the operation of the Group; marketing strategies; enhanced data collection methodologies; and capacity building.

Indeed, by all indications, the Desbarras Sea Turtle Watch Project is expected to become a model of a successful community-based natural resource management initiative for Saint Lucia and beyond.