# Research and Monitoring of Bonaire's Sea Turtles: 2015 Technical Report

Report prepared by
Sue Willis Ph.D., Mabel Nava M.Sc., Kaj Schut M.Sc. & Seth Stapleton Ph.D.

To learn more, please contact:
Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire • Mabel Nava, Manager
stcb@bonaireturtles.org • Phone: (+599) 717-2225 • Turtle hotline: (+599) 780-0433
PO Box 492 • Kralendijk, Bonaire • Dutch Caribbean

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Cover image: Solvin Zankl

## Executive Summary

Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire (STCB) was formed in 1991 in order to protect the island's marine turtle populations. In 2002 we standardized our research and monitoring efforts, following the appointment of a Scientific Officer. Annually we monitor our nesting beaches around Bonaire, conduct intensive in-water netting and snorkel surveys (capture-mark-recapture), and track post-breeding migration using satellite telemetry. These techniques provide us with a better understanding of Bonaire sea turtles' breeding success, abundance, health, growth rates, migratory paths and distant feeding grounds, residency duration, habitat quality, and threats.

During the 2015 season, we recorded 56 nests at our index beach on Klein Bonaire. Total hawksbill (46) and loggerhead (10) nests documented there were once again similar to numbers observed during recent years. Across Bonaire and Klein Bonaire, we observed three sea turtle species crawling 233 times, which includes 77 confirmed or suspected nests. Eight green turtle nests were recorded in northeastern Bonaire with a further five green turtle nests on Klein Bonaire. Hawksbills and loggerheads exclusively nested on Klein Bonaire and the beaches of southern Bonaire. Total nesting activities peaked from mid-June through to mid-September, with nests being laid between April and the end of December 2015.

We continue to be concerned about false crawls (unsuccessful nesting attempts) for both hawksbills and loggerheads as we again documented a much higher number of false crawls in 2015 than in 2013 when our concerns first developed. This phenomenon may result from a small number of individuals which were inefficient nesters (i.e., false crawled multiple times before successfully laying a nest), disturbance to turtles during nesting, and/or indicate deterioration in the quality of particular nesting sites, perhaps due to factors such as presence of an invasive vegetation species on our index beach. Estimates of clutch size and hatch success suggest that nearly 8,170 sea turtles hatched on the beaches of Bonaire and Klein Bonaire during 2015, including some 5,170 hawksbills, 1,700 loggerheads and 1,300 green turtles.

During in-water snorkel surveys, we observed and captured green turtles and hawksbills in all regions sampled, including Klein Bonaire, along the west coast of Bonaire, and near the reef bordering Lac. This year netting in Lac was conducted in four weekly sessions across the year, as a result of research in 2014 that suggested this may be a more effective sampling strategy. The aggregation of green turtles near Lac remains much larger than sites along the west coast, and greens captured there were bigger than conspecifics elsewhere, perhaps a result of the composition and high densities of sea grasses in Lac.

The total prevalence of fibropapillomatosis (FP) among green turtles captured in nets at Lac and Lagoen marginally declined in 2015 for the first time in five years, although there were still nearly

a third of captures in the nets observed to have external tumors present (30%). The highest incidence was at Lagoen where six of the seven green turtles captured in the net there were observed with external FP tumors.

During 2015 STCB began the fieldwork component of a five-year research program in partnership with a research team funded by the Dutch National Research Organization (NWO) to study connectivity among sea turtles between the Dutch Caribbean Islands. As part of this research, satellite tags were fixed to four sub-adult green turtles; 19 nests were equipped with temperature loggers; and a long term experiment was set up in Lac Cai to learn more about turtle grazing and seagrass productivity there.

There were 27 sea turtle hotline stranding incidents reported during 2015, involving 35 individual sea turtles. Once again, one of the biggest threats Caribbean-wide to sea turtles was the fishing industry and associated by-catch. There were two turtles in trouble in separate incidents requiring rehabilitation early in 2015, including an olive ridley sea turtle which was successfully returned to the wild post rehabilitation.

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## Background

Twenty-four years ago, STCB began monitoring the status of and threats to Bonaire's sea turtles, using the resulting knowledge to protect them. Comprehensive local laws, as well as international treaties, now protect sea turtles, their nests, and eggs from harvest and harassment. The community and tourism industry generally understand the importance of sea turtles to a healthy ecosystem and their value to an economy centered on dive tourism. And it is a rare resident or guest who is not captivated by encounters with these beautiful and endangered species.

Today, the conservation landscape has changed. The most serious challenges facing Bonaire's sea turtles are not direct threats like poaching or lack of support for sea turtle protection. The main threats now are indirect, related to a rapidly increasing human population and the development that goes along with it. These indirect threats to sea turtles are also the major threats to Bonaire's rich ecosystems, biodiversity, and our own quality of life.

In this landscape, we no longer look at sea turtle conservation as something apart from society. To ensure a secure future for Bonaire's sea turtles, we must address the issues that threaten sea turtles, biodiversity and social well-being, because they are inter-related. Sea turtles can thrive only when their ecosystems are healthy and the human community thrives.

Conservation and applied research remain the core work of STCB, as is clear from our mission. Our work spans education and outreach, policy, and research and conservation. This technical report summarizes STCB's scientific findings from the 2015 season. STCB's research and monitoring activities are designed to better understand Bonaire's nesting population and foraging aggregations, to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge in the greater Caribbean region, and to inform sound management policies on national and regional scales. Our work includes regular foot patrols of nesting beaches to assess the volume of nesting activities, post-hatch nest excavations to estimate how many hatchlings are released from Bonaire's beaches each year, and extensive snorkel and netting surveys of key sea turtle foraging grounds.

## Nesting Beach Surveys

Monitoring Bonaire's nesting beaches remains a fundamental component of our research program. No Name Beach on Klein Bonaire continues to serve as our index beach for assessing abundance and species composition. We patrolled this beach three mornings per week, beginning in late April and continuing through December. We documented all crawls, identified species, and recorded the outcome as a false crawl (unsuccessful nesting attempt; no eggs were laid), confirmed nest (eggs were sighted), or suspected nest (eggs were not observed, but site disturbance suggested that a nest was laid). We recorded 46 total (i.e., confirmed and suspected) hawksbill nests, ten total loggerhead nests and five green turtle nests on No Name Beach in 2015. Although hawksbill numbers have modestly declined since 2012 (Figure 1), Bonaire's nesting populations are relatively small, and fluctuations in nesting numbers are not unexpected. The long-term trends in nesting for both hawksbills and loggerheads continue to suggest relative stability (Figure 1).

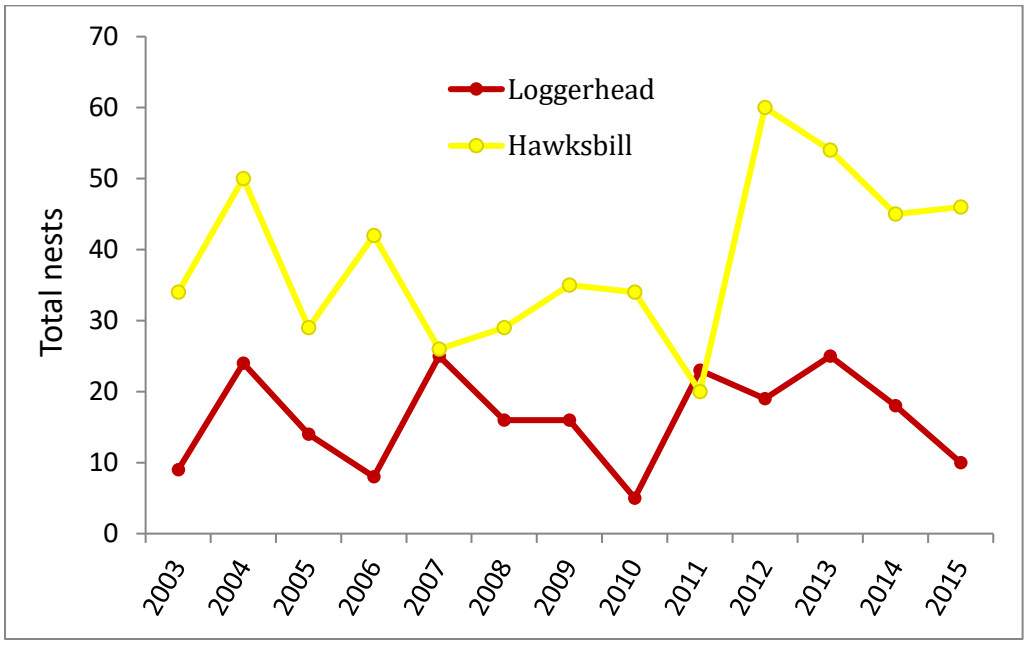


**Figure 1.** Historical nesting trends of loggerheads and hawksbills at No Name Beach on Klein Bonaire, which serves as the index site for nesting activities. Number of nests includes confirmed and suspected nests.

Sea turtles are late maturing and likely do not reproduce until at least 15 – 20 years of age. As such, hatchlings that crawled from Bonaire's beaches when monitoring began in 2002 will probably only return to nest here in the next several years. Thus, although 2015 marked STCB's 13$^{th}$ year of standardized monitoring on Klein Bonaire, this remains a relatively short time period from which to assess trends in our nesting populations. Additionally, as Bonaire's nesting

populations are relatively small, significant fluctuations in nesting numbers between years are expected. Continued monitoring will provide a better understanding of long-term trends and allow us to realize the impacts of conservation efforts.

On Bonaire, we recorded one hawksbill nest, seven loggerhead nests, and eight green turtle nests. Species composition was consistent between Klein Bonaire (KB) and the beaches of southern Bonaire: hawksbills were the predominant species recorded, and loggerhead nesting was less common (Figure 2). In 2015 green turtles nested both on Playa Chikitu in the Washington Slagbaai National Park (northeast Bonaire) and on Klein Bonaire.

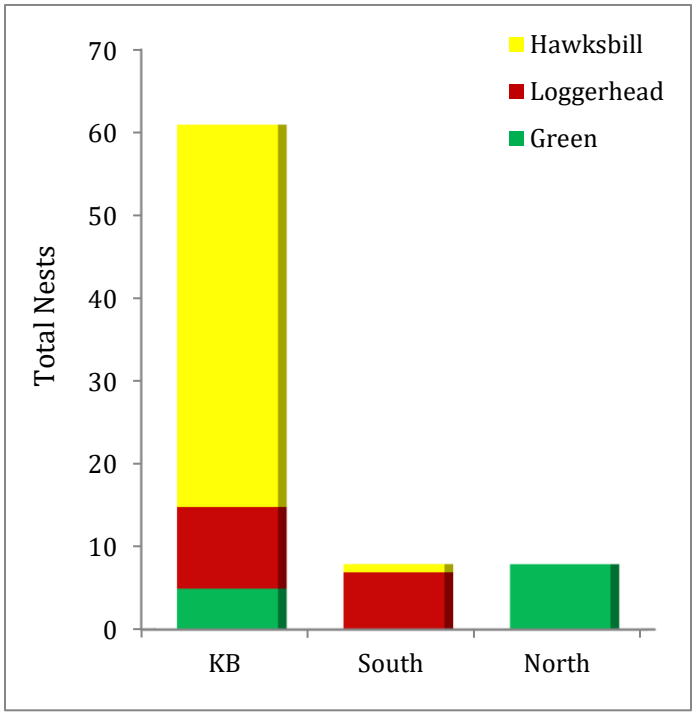


**Figure 2.** Total nests, categorized by geographic region, recorded during the 2015 research season. "South" and "North" denote general regions of mainland Bonaire.

On Klein Bonaire, loggerhead nesting was largely concentrated in the central portion of No Name Beach, whereas hawksbills nested across most of the beach (Figure 3). Once again nesting attempts on the western areas (i.e., low beach marker numbers) were often unsuccessful and resulted primarily in false crawls. The far eastern end of the site also appeared to provide less suitable nesting habitat; we observed just two hawksbill crawls there and recorded no nests.

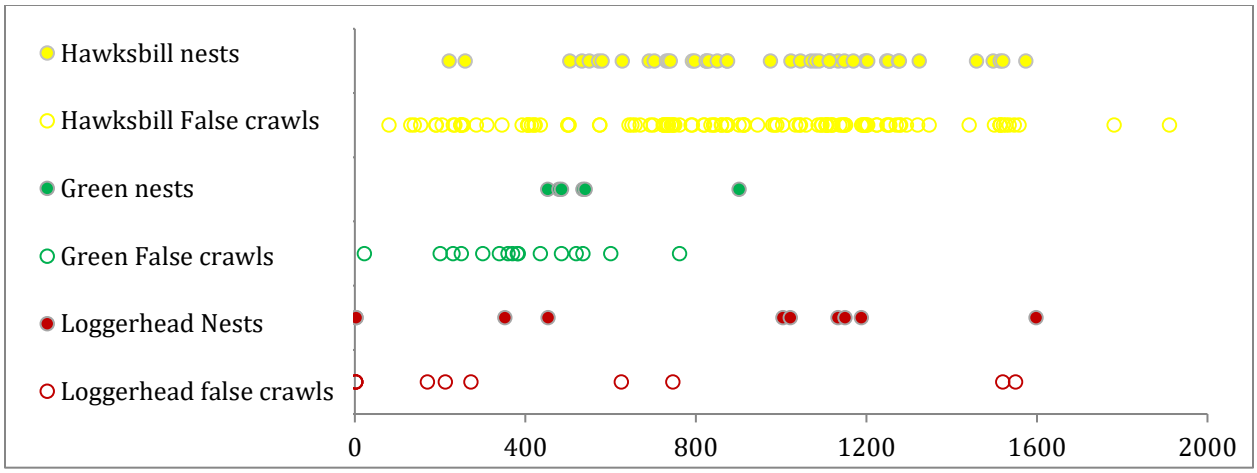


**Figure 3.** Distribution of nesting activities, including successful nests and false crawls, at No Name Beach on Klein Bonaire during the 2015 season.

Klein Bonaire, our index beach, is systemically monitored by trained STCB staff and volunteers, therefore these data provide the most reliable indicators of seasonality. We first observed nesting on Klein Bonaire in late April, and we documented hawksbill nests until the end of December (Figure 4). Consistent with previous years, the loggerhead nesting season spanned May – September, whereas hawksbill nesting remained relatively stable from June – October and continued at a lower level until the end of December.

Sea turtles may false crawl several times before laying a nest and individuals vary with respect to nesting efficiency. Hence, confirmed and suspected nests provide a more accurate picture of seasonal trends. False crawls can be informative, however, with long term trends indicating possible changes in nesting habitat suitability. In 2015 the number of false crawls reduced in the south and north of Bonaire for all species, with just six false crawls recorded with 16 nests or suspected nests. The observed false crawl to nest ratio for loggerheads on Klein Bonaire was 2.1 false crawls / nest in 2014 and this also dropped to 1.3 false crawls / nest in 2015. However, for hawksbills, ratios increased for the second year running from 2.1 false crawls / nest to 2.6 false crawls / nest in 2015. One green turtle also nested on Klein Bonaire recording 16 false crawls to five nests laid.

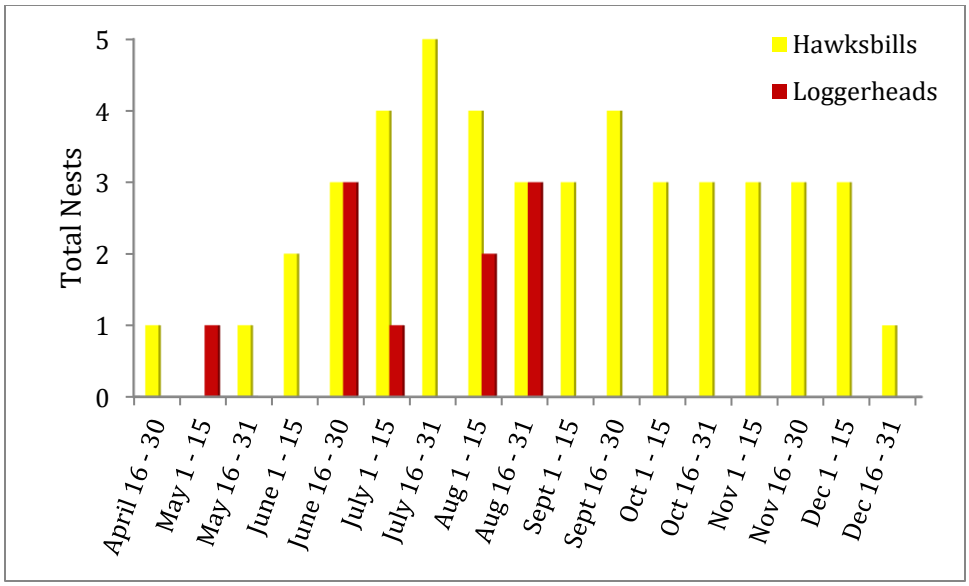


**Figure 4.** Seasonality of total nests (confirmed and suspected) recorded on Klein Bonaire during the 2015 research season.

Bonaire's nesting populations are small, so it is likely that a few individuals who are inefficient nesters – in other words, turtles that false crawled several times before successfully nesting – may contribute to this discrepancy. However, such a high volume of false crawls also may result from changes to nesting habitat, other challenges with beach management or from climatic factors (notably temperature and rainfall). Partly as a result of concerns at the increasing ratio of false crawls to nests, research was initiated in 2015 into nesting habitat on Klein Bonaire (see section on Research Initiatives later in this report).

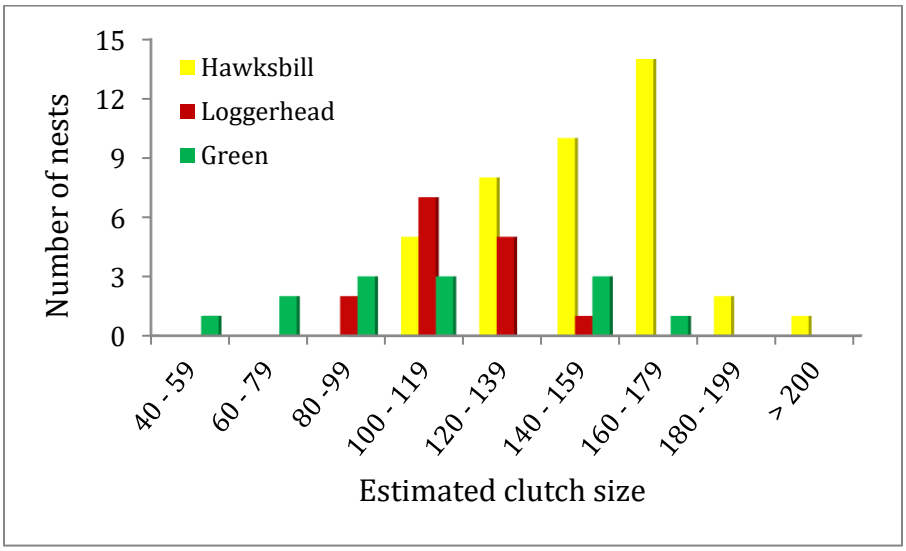


**Figure 5.** Clutch sizes of loggerhead, hawksbill, and green nests recorded on Bonaire and Klein Bonaire during the 2015 research season.

Evaluating reproductive success continues to be a core component of STCB's research program. Estimated clutch sizes (number of eggs / nest) varied by species [loggerhead (mean: 119; Standard Deviation: 15); hawksbill (mean: 148; SD: 28); green (mean: 113; SD: 35); Figure 5]. Hatch success for nests remaining in situ, defined as the percentage of eggs per clutch that successfully hatch, was highest for green turtles (mean: 76%; SD: 20%) and hawksbills (mean: 72%; SD: 32%) than for loggerheads (mean: 60%; SD: 32%; Figure 6). The low hatch success for loggerhead nests was primarily from the nests in the south of Bonaire (n=7) which had only 37% hatch success, compared with loggerhead nests on Klein Bonaire (n=7) which registered 84% hatch success. This finding does not necessarily indicate lower quality sites for incubation in the south of Bonaire and may be an artefact of relatively small sample sizes.

Based on the clutch size and hatch success data, we estimate that a total of nearly 8,170 turtles hatched from nests on Klein Bonaire and Bonaire in 2015, including approximately 5,170 hawksbills, 1,700 loggerheads, and 1,300 green turtles.

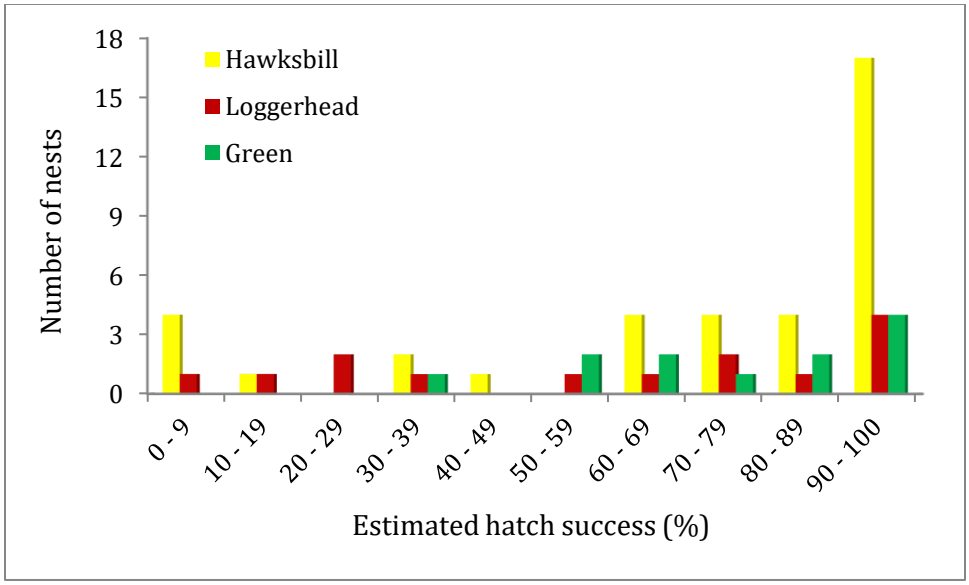


**Figure 6.** Estimated hatch success of loggerhead, hawksbill and green nests recorded on Bonaire and Klein Bonaire during the 2015 monitoring season. Nests that were relocated due to proximity to the high-water mark or other threats are excluded.

## Foraging Ground Surveys

A rigorous in-water research program constitutes the other primary element of our work. This program, which seeks to better understand the sea turtle aggregations foraging in Bonaire's waters, collects both capture and observational data and is implemented with two techniques. First, we conduct snorkel surveys along the entire west coast, around Klein Bonaire, and on the reef outside Lac (Figure 7). During these surveys, turtle sightings are recorded and, when possible, turtles are captured for measuring and tagging by the research team. In 2015, sampling around Klein Bonaire and along the west coast was completed from the end of January until April. Two transects were also conducted along the reef adjacent to Lac in 2015, a lower number than our goal due to high winds in 2015 which precluded surveying on the east coast. Although we observed hawksbills and green turtles island-wide, densities of greens were much higher than hawksbills at all sites (Figure 8). Similar to previous years, we recorded the highest concentrations of green turtles outside Lac: an estimated 100 individuals were observed during sampling there.


**Figure 7.** Sectors of coastal areas of Bonaire and Klein Bonaire covered during the 2015 in-water snorkel surveys. Survey tracks are marked in gray (lines connect survey start and end points but do not necessarily indicate precise survey tracks).

We conducted netting, the second in-water method used to gather information about Bonaire's sea turtle aggregations, in Lac and, to a lesser extent, in Lagoen to the north. During 2015, we conducted netting sessions over four one week periods. We continued to more widely distribute net sets across the north-central portion of Lac to ensure that our sampling reflected the entire region. Sampling near Sorobon (to the south) also allowed us to increase captures of hawksbills. Total captures from all survey methods during 2015 were the highest on record once again (n=264) and we continued to document much higher capture rates for green turtles (n=238) than hawksbills (n=26) (Figure 8).

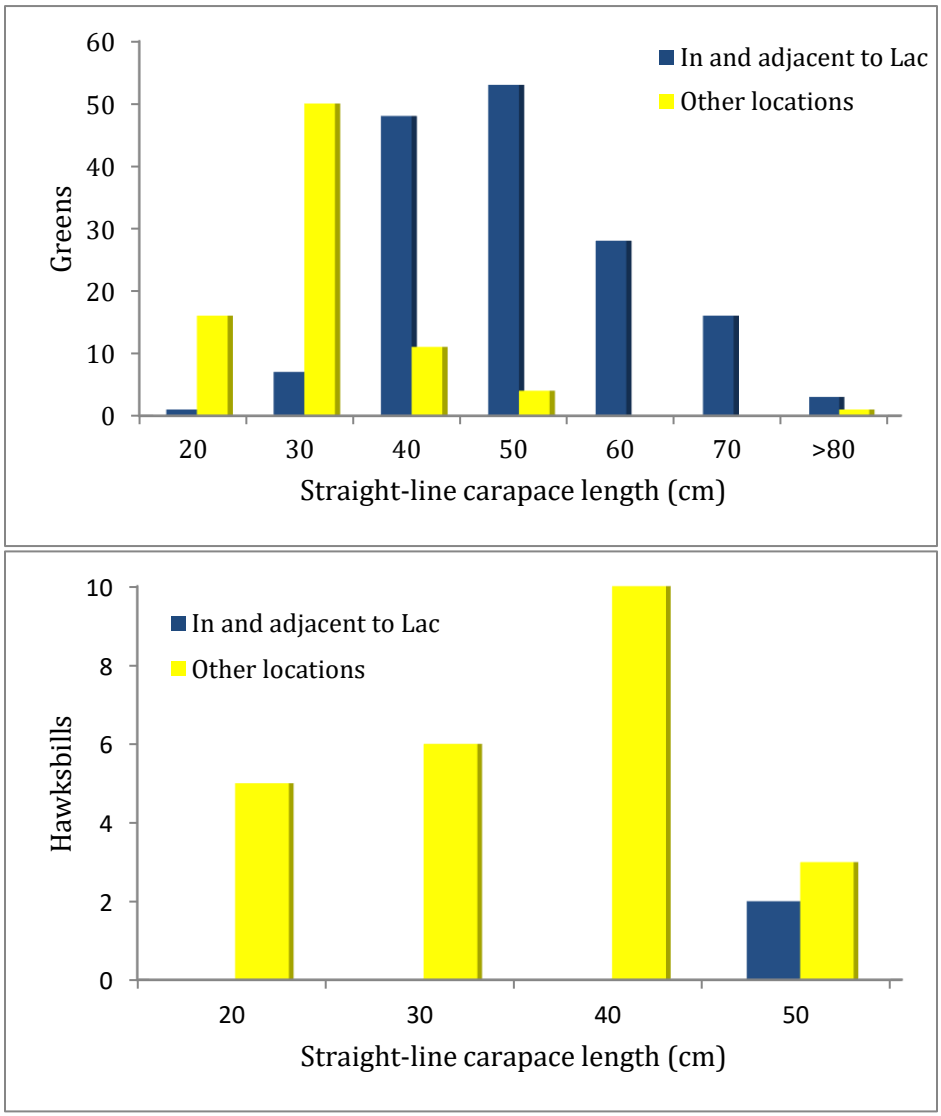


**Figure 8.** Size classes of green and hawksbill turtles captured in and around Lac in comparison to other locations around Bonaire and Klein Bonaire during the 2015 research season.

## Prevalence of Disease

Fibropapillomatosis (FP) is a disease characterized by tumors concentrated around soft skin tissues, the eyes, and the base of flippers. FP tumors, which primarily afflict green turtles, interfere with daily functions and ultimately may result in death. Causes of the disease are not fully understood, but factors such as environmental pollutants and urbanization may be associated with FP's occurrence (e.g., Aguirre and Lutz 2004: EcoHealth 1:275-285).

After a recent four-year trend of increasing prevalence of the disease in the green turtles captured in and adjacent to Lac, a slight decrease in those infected with visible FP tumors was noted in 2015. However, there were still 30% of the green turtles captured in the net at Lac Cai and Lagoen found to be infected with the disease (Figure 9).

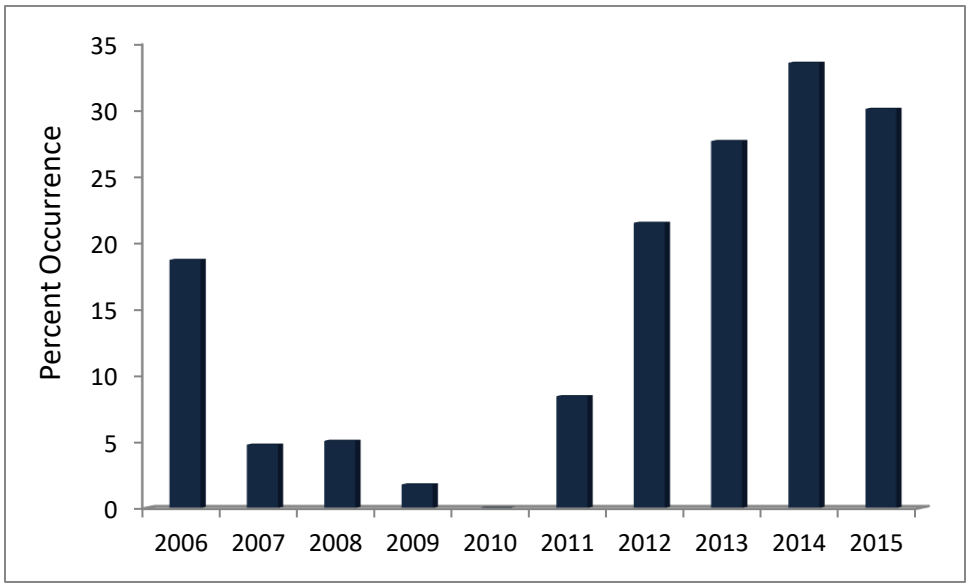


**Figure 9.** Occurrence of visible fibropapilloma tumors on green turtles captured in and around Lac, Bonaire during the 2015 research season.

## New Research Initiatives

During 2015 STCB began the fieldwork component of a five-year research program in partnership with Dr Lisa Becking and Dr Marjolijn Christiansen and their research team from Wageningen University & Groningen Universities. This partnership began back in 2014 with an award from the NWO (Dutch National Research Organization) to study connectivity among sea turtles among Dutch Caribbean Islands. This project complements STCB's long term monitoring and research work on Bonaire.

In July 2015, during fieldwork sessions, satellite tags were fixed to four sub-adult green turtles at Lac Cai; 19 sea turtle nests were equipped with temperature loggers; and a long term experiment was set up in Lac Cai to learn more about the feeding behavior of green turtles and the effect of grazing on seagrass productivity, species composition and invasive seagrass expansion rate. Additionally, one transmitter was deployed on a post nesting green turtle at Playa Chikitu in the Washington Park and DNA and isotope samples were taken to learn more about the origins and feeding habits of green and hawksbill turtles. This project will provide relevant scientific information that will enhance existing sea turtle conservation management in the Dutch Caribbean. During the summer of 2015 STCB's staff trained and assisted the NWO team to extend their research in Aruba with Turtugaruba and in Curacao with Carmabi (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** In-water survey training of partner organizations being delivered by STCB staff member "Funchi". Photo credit Solvin Zankl.

## Turtle Strandings

Stranded turtles are animals found dead, injured, or sick, or sometimes apparently healthy but in an unsuitable circumstance, such as entangled in debris along the shoreline. Strandings are reported to STCB directly via the Sea Turtle Hotline (+599-780-0433).

During 2015 there were 27 sea turtle hotline stranding incidents reported, involving 35 individual sea turtles. Of these 27 incidents, four were reports of turtles in trouble that were not subsequently found by STCB staff.

Seven of the incidents involved 13 hatchlings and post-hatchlings found stranded in unsuitable situations, primarily in the Sorobon area on the east coast of Bonaire. During 2015 there were excessive amounts of the floating seaweed *Sargassum* washed ashore to the eastern side of Bonaire and this was the likely cause of the increased number of hatchling/post-hatchling strandings in 2015. STCB has a strict protocol for these incidents which was followed in each of these cases.

Once again, one of the biggest threats Caribbean-wide to sea turtles was the fishing industry and associated by-catch. In 2015, of the 27 incidents, ten (37%) were related to fisheries, including three dead turtles (two juvenile hawksbills and one juvenile green turtle) found together discarded by the roadside, two of which had been butchered for their meat (Figure 11). Necropsy is routinely carried out on all dead turtles, unless decomposition is too severe. Tags and necropsy

**Figure 11.** The butchered remains of two juvenile hawksbills and a juvenile green turtle were discovered on the roadside.

findings suggested that they had been fished from Klein Bonaire, though whether this was accidental by-catch or as a targeted species could not be conclusively determined, despite involvement from the police.

A further two green turtles were found dead in separate incidents with fishing related injuries. Additionally, six turtles were reported with fishing hooks in the mouth/flipper, five of which were found (four greens and one hawksbill) and the hooks and line successfully removed. The remaining fishing related incident was the removal by a local resident of a home-made spear from the neck of a small green turtle at one of the popular snorkel sites, Andrea II.

There were two turtles in trouble in separate incidents requiring rehabilitation early in 2015, the first of which was an Olive Ridley (named "Olive" in social media reporting) who was found floating and unable to swim effectively in Lac Cai. After a short period of intervention, and with the assistance of a visiting specialist vet Dr. Michele Mautino and STCB volunteers, the turtle was successfully released back to the wild (Figure 12). Efforts to rehabilitate a juvenile hawksbill (named "Timmy" in social media) were not as successful however, as the turtle remained emaciated and unable to feed, despite lengthy rehabilitation and so it was euthanized.

**Figure 12.** Release of the previously stranded Olive Ridley, post rehabilitation.

During 2015 an adult female tagged green turtle washed ashore dead, and necropsy suggested that the turtle had become ill during its nesting migration and had died of peritonitis. Research into the origin of the tag found that it was tagged on 18 July 2012 whilst nesting at Tortuguero, Costa Rica. A further stranded turtle was discovered dead at Lagoen with severe fibropapillomatosis and cause of death was established to be related to the fibropapilloma tumours found internally.

During in-water surveys, two emaciated green turtles were captured in the net with such severe FP that a decision was made with the veterinarian to euthanize the animal. One green turtle also died during netting surveys of unknown cause.

Once again, STCB is very grateful to Craig Dewey and Kathy Pound for housing the STCB rehabilitation pool when required and to volunteers Hans & Jannie Koning, Rob Hulsbergen and Catrien van Manen who regularly assist STCB staff with turtle in trouble calls.

## Appendix I. 2015 Funders and Donors

STCB is a non-profit, non-governmental organization. We raise funds through conservation and research grants and contracts, merchandise sales and from individual and business donors.

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Since 2008, WWF - Netherlands has been the flagship funder for STCB's sea turtle conservation work on Bonaire.

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Foundation to Preserve Klein Bonaire
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Dr Sue Willis, Project Coordinator
Gielmon "Funchi" Egbreghts, Contractor Field Technician

**Scientific Advisor**

Dr Seth Stapleton

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Catrien van Manen
Craig Dewey & Kathy Pound
Dagny Lüdermann
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Hans & Jannie Koning
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Ralph 'Moogie' Stewart
Richard Willis
Rick & Lila Nicholson
Rob Hulsbergen
Sjoukje Hiemstra
Wouter & Marian Sonneveldt

## Appendix IV. Ways to donate

You can help protect Bonaire's sea turtles by donating to STCB. We welcome – and depend on – the financial support of people like you. Whether it's $10, $100, or $10,000, it will make a difference. Please note that, as of January 1st 2015, the Dutch Tax Service (Belastingdienst) granted Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire with ANBI status. ANBI status favors STCB's Donors in countries that grant tax concessions to foreign registered charities, as well as those based in the Netherlands. STCB Donors may be able to deduct the amount from taxable income.

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Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire
PO Box 492
Kralendijk, Bonaire
Dutch Caribbean (Netherlands Antilles)

**Donate by bank transfer**

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Correspondent Bank: Standard Chartered Bank
ABA # 026002561
Swift Code: SCBLUS33

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*To discuss other ideas for giving, please call STCB Manager, Mabel Nava, on +599-717-2225, or email us at stcb@bonaireturtles.org*