

Leatherback Turtles, *Dermochelys coriacea*, Nesting in French Guiana, 1978-1995

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ABSTRACT.- Ya:lima:po beach in French Guiana exhibits the highest concentration of leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) nesting in the world. Scientists from more than 25 countries have worked within the Kawana marine turtle project for 16 years. Numbering and tagging of leatherbacks has been the main activity of this project. Number of nests per year has been estimated for 13 nesting seasons between 1978 and 1995. More than 50,000 nestings were recorded annually in 1988 and 1992, but only 10 to 15 thousand annually in 1978-1986, 1993, and 1995, with intermediate numbers of 20 to 30 thousand annually in 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1994. A general increase in the number of nests is observed in the last few years as compared to the first years, but the actual trend is unclear. Analysis of the database of tagged leatherbacks (over 31,000 data points) elucidates behavior of this species within and between nesting seasons.

KEY WORDS: - Reptilia; Testudines; Dermochelyidae; *Dermochelys coriacea*; sea turtle; nesting; status; population; conservation; migration; French Guiana.

Four species of marine turtles nest frequently in French Guiana : *Dermochelys coriacea*, *Chelonia mydas*, *Lepidochelys olivacea*, and *Eretmochelys imbricata*. For every 1000 nests of *D. coriacea*, approximately 100 nests of *C. mydas*, 10 of *L. olivacea*, and 1 of *E. imbricata* are seen (these values are only approximations and should not be used for further calculations). Exceptionally, females of *Caretta caretta* are also observed but at a rate of less than one per year. Turtles nest on beaches located along the entire 400 km coast line of French Guiana. However, many of these beaches appear and disappear at an approximate cycle of every 15 years due to the displacement of mud banks from the Amazon River in Brazil. The only stable beach in French Guiana is located on the estuary of the Mana and Maroni Rivers on the border to Surinam, between two Amerindian villages, Awa:la and Ya:lima:po. Approximately 90 to 95% of all the leatherbacks nesting in French Guiana are seen there.

The nesting seasons of the various marine turtles in French Guiana extend from early March to mid-August for *D. coriacea*, March to June for *C.*

Near Ya:lima:po village, a center (Kawana project) established 16 years ago for the study of marine turtles has welcomed scientists and persons interested in the protection and the study of marine turtles (Fretey, 1996). There, from 1984 to 1993, a turtle hatchery has permitted the study of artificial incubation of leatherback eggs (Lescure et al., 1985; Girondot et al., 1990) and the influence of temperature on sex determination (Rimblot et al., 1985; Rimblot-Baly et al., 1986; Desvages et al., 1993). Since 1993, the artificial incubation of eggs has been discontinued for ethical reasons (Mrosovsky and Godfrey, 1995; Girondot and Pieau, 1996; Lovich, 1996). Data obtained on *D. coriacea* during the past 18 years (1978-1995) will be reviewed in this paper.

Materials and Methods

Numbering.- Turtles are numbered by nightly beach patrols from mid-April to late September. Outside this period, two local inhabitants count turtle tracks in the morning. In *D. coriacea*, a very large proportion of females landing also nest and the number of turtle tracks is therefore a good estimate of the number of nests. However, this method is not

mydas, and April to August for *L. olivacea*. Nesting seasons for *E. imbricata* and *C. caretta* cannot be defined due to the too small numbers of these species. For *D. coriacea* a second nesting season small numbers of females per night has also been observed in December and January. The same observation has been made in Surinam (H. Reichart, pers. comm.).

The time of arrival for nesting on the beach by leatherbacks is dependent on the localization of the beach and the tide level. Turtles nest during the entire night on beaches outside the Mana-Maroni estuary but mostly around high tide for beaches within the estuary. However, time of nesting is also sensitive to the exact localization within the estuary and the tide level (Fretey and Girondot, 1989a).

Tagging and Identification. - From 1978 to 1984, plastic tags were used, but females lost them very rapidly. From 1985, females were tagged using one titanium tag on the front left flipper (1985-86), one titanium tag on the rear left flipper (1987-88) or one monel tag on the rear left flipper (1990-93). In 1994, two monel tags were put on each rear flipper and in 1995, PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags were put in the right shoulder of 250 females.

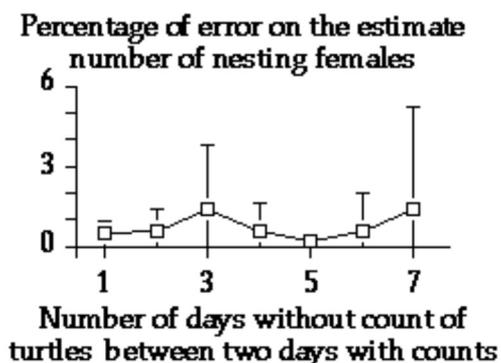


Figure 1. Percentage of error between the actual total number of nests seen in 1987 and its estimate using interpolation, based on different numbers of days between surveys.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Morphometrics. - In 1987 and 1988, 1328 female leatherbacks were measured and 15 weighed. They had a mean weight of 339.3 kg, SD 41.3 (range 250-415 kg); a mean straight length of 154.6 cm, SD 8.98 (range 127-252 cm); and a mean straight width of 87.3 cm, SD 6.21 (range 67-109 cm).

suitable from May to July because too many turtle tracks are present on the beach and only visual counts of turtles seen during the night are used.

Since 1988, a strategy has been developed to allow a good estimate of the total number of nests without counting turtles each night. Data from the 1987 season were used as a reference because the number of females was known exactly for all nights of that season. The percentage of error between the actual number of nests and its estimate using interpolation was calculated. The error was minimized if counts were performed every 7 days with 5 days without count between them (Fig. 1) and therefore this strategy has been used since 1988.

Moreover, old people of the villages say that leatherbacks did not nest on this beach during the 1950s. From year to year, a large variation of the number of nests is observed and it is not possible to determine a trend for recent years.

According to data from Surinam, concordance in the number of nests per year is observed for the two populations (data from Surinam are from Weijerman et al., 1996). The correlation between the annual number of nests in French Guiana and Gandoca Beach, Costa Rica (Chacón et al., 1995) is high but not significant (test for the data for 1991-92 and 1994-95, $r=-0.787$, $p=0.28$). However, it is interesting to note that the year with the highest number of nests in French Guiana (1992) corresponds to the lowest number in Costa Rica and inversely, the year with the lowest number of nests in French Guiana (1995) corresponds to the year with the highest number of nests in Costa Rica. Data for more years are needed to confirm this pattern.

Tagging. - Our database of tagged turtles in French Guiana contains 31,557 data points extending over 9 years from 1987 to 1995. Analysis of this database permits us elucidate some aspects of behavior within and between nesting seasons for *D. coriacea* in French Guiana, as outlined below.

Behavior Within Nesting Season. - For the 1988 season, the mean number of nests per female was

Numbering.- The actual number of nests from 1978 to 1995 is shown in Fig. 2 (the estimates for 1978, 1982 and 1983 were performed with data of less than 2 months and only half the beach patrolled). More than 50,000 nestings were recorded annually in 1988 and 1992, but only 10 to 15 thousand annually in 1978-1986, 1993, and 1995, with intermediate numbers of 20 to 30 thousand annually in 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1994. A global increase in nesting has been observed since earliest reports for French Guiana (Pritchard, 1969; Schulz, 1971; Pritchard, 1973).

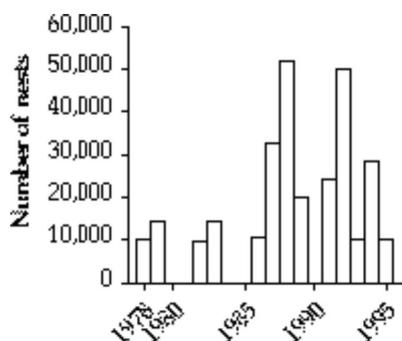


Figure 2. Number of leatherback nests per year on the Ya:lima:po- Awa:la beach, French Guiana.

estimated as 7.52 (Fretey and Girondot, 1989b). The estimate for 1987 was lower (1.48; Fretey and Girondot, 1988) but the methodology was also different and the value is also dependent on the tagging effort on the beach. Comparison of the two values for mean number of nests per female is impossible due to the lack of confidence intervals for the 1987 estimate. The 1988 estimate is more accurate but is probably subject to variation from year to year. The mean number of days between two nests varies from 6 to 15 with a mode of 9 to 10 (Fretey and Girondot, 1988). This observation is typical for *D. coriacea* (National Research Council, 1990). However, peaks of nesting are seen every 15 days during spring tides (full and new moon) on the Ya:lima:po beach (Fig. 3). These two observations appear to be contradictory.

We have analyzed whether females adjust their nesting day as a function of the tide (and by consequence, the moon phase). Using the 1988 tagging data, we analyzed all tagged females that nested between 14 to 11 (Group A) and 9 to 6 (Group B) days prior to a full or new moon. The distributions of the internesting intervals were then established for these two groups. Group A (-14 to -11 days) had a longer mean internesting interval of 10.01 days, Group B (-9 to -6 days) had a shorter interval of 9.76 days, with the difference significant ($G^2=42.6$, $p<10^{-4}$) (Fig. 4). Therefore, females adjust their internesting return date to be closer to a full or new moon and this behavior produces the observed peaks of nesting for spring tides.

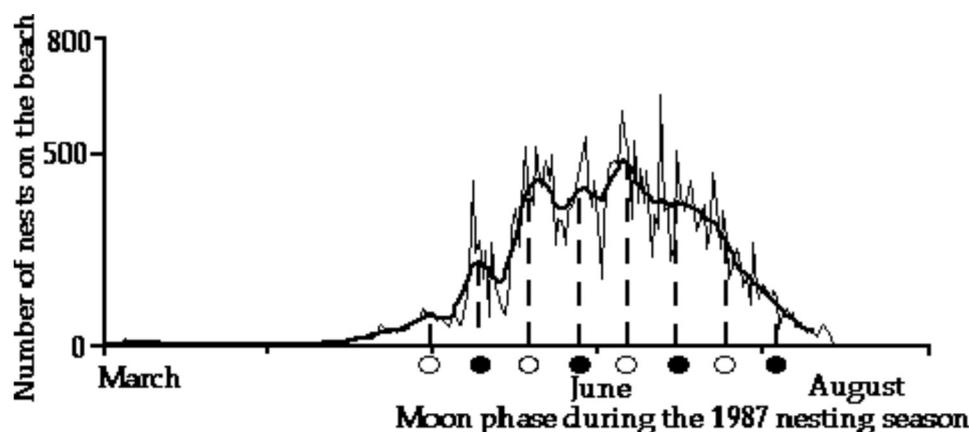


Figure 3. Number of leatherback nests during the 1987 nesting season (normal line) and moving average (15 days around each point) for the same data (bold line). Peaks of leatherback nesting are observed during spring tides (full and new moon; dashed lines).

We have very few data concerning shifting of

Females are caught both on west and east Atlantic

nesting beach. Only two records of females tagged in French Guiana and recovered in Surinam are available (Matthew Godfrey, pers. comm.). One (G36490) nested and was tagged at Ya:lima:po beach in 1993 and was then seen to nest on Matapica beach, Surinam, in 1995. Another (G36866) was tagged and nested twice at Ya:lima:po beach in 1991 was seen to nest on Matapica beach, Surinam, on 5 May 1995, and then nested again two times at Ya:lima:po beach on 27 May and 24 June 1995. The Ya:lima:po and Matapica beaches are 150 km apart from each other. Apparently, a shift of nesting beach within the Guianas region is a possible but not frequent event.

Behavior Between Nesting Seasons. - From year to year, the number of turtles tagged in French Guiana and then recovered elsewhere within the Atlantic Ocean is growing (Table 1).

coasts. For example, the female G41420/G45918 was captured in Spain only 5 months after its last nesting in French Guiana. The females G36302 and G43041/G43042 were also captured only 5 months after their last nesting in French Guiana, but this time on west Atlantic coasts in USA. One year after nesting in French Guiana, females have been seen on east Atlantic coasts (France, Spain, and Morocco) or on west Atlantic coasts (Florida, Georgia and South Carolina).

Female G34567/QQM631/G41593 was remarkable. It was first tagged in French Guiana in 1990, then seen alive in a fishing net and re-tagged in Florida in 1991, and then re-observed nesting twice in French Guiana in 1992 and 1994.

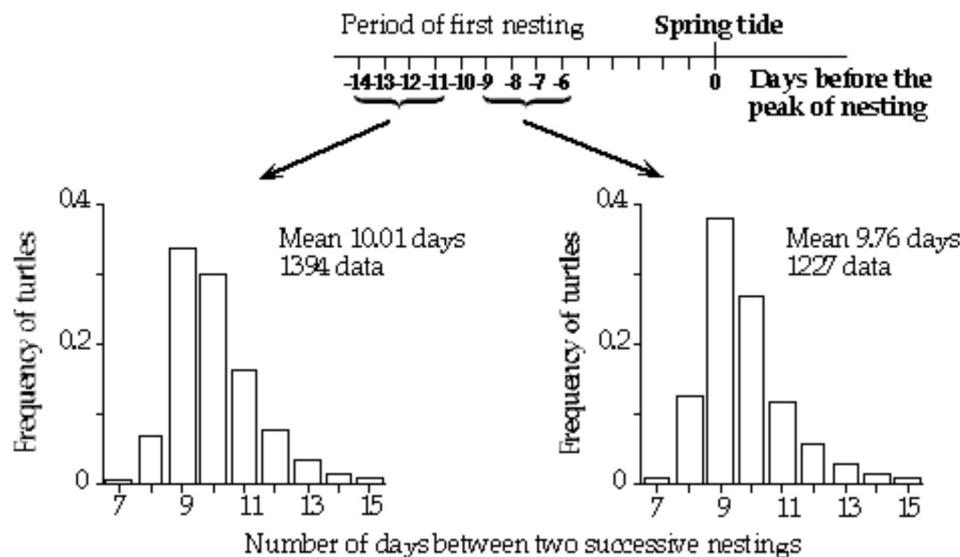


Figure 4. Distributions of the number of days between two successive nesting processes for turtles having nested (Group A) days -14 to -11 before spring tide (full and new moon) and (Group B) days -9 to -6 before spring tide, utilizing data from 1988.

Table 1. List of leatherbacks tagged in French Guiana and recovered elsewhere within the Atlantic.

Tag Number	Nesting Dates in French Guiana	Date and Location of Capture	Number of Months
G20024/	1985	17 Feb 1989	9

West Atlantic Captures

According to these few data (0.03% of the turtles tagged in French Guiana have been observed outside the region), it appears that females migrate to the north from French Guiana after the nesting season and do not follow any particular route within the north Atlantic. But the data are still relatively scarce and many more are needed to truly understand the pelagic habits of females (Fretey and Girondot, 1996).

Remigration Interval Between Nesting Seasons.-
The remigration intervals for tagged females

G31511	14 May 1988	Georgia, USA	returning to nest have been studied for several years
G35151	29 Jun 1991	8 May 1992	10 (Table 2). It appears that the distribution of the
		South Carolina, USA	number of years recorded between two nesting
G36302	21 Jul 1993	16 Jan 1994	5 seasons is highly sensitive to the position of tagging
	1 Aug 1993	Florida, USA	and the kind of tags used (compare years 1987-88
G38947	21 Jun 1990	12 Mar 1993	32 and years after 1990 for different types of tagging).
		Florida, USA	From 1985-86, only 4 females out of more than
G42743	21 May 1991	12 Apr 1992	10 1000 were seen 3 years after nesting in French
		Georgia, USA	Guiana (Fretey and Girondot, 1990) reflecting a
G43041/ G43042	8 Jun 1994	7 Nov 1994	5 high incidence of tag loss.
		Georgia, USA	The remigration distributions are very different for
G23339	1987	Feb 1989	19 $p < 0.0001$; for this test, turtles seen after 4 and 5
		Georgia, USA	years for 1990 and 1991 are grouped with turtles
G25376	1988	Sep 1988	4 not seen in order to be consistent with the 1992
		Newfoundland, Canada	data). Thus, nesting intervals are not cyclic because
G34567/ G41593/ QQM631	29 May 1990	30 Jun 1991	11 it varies for turtles seen a given year and they are
	7 Jun 1990	Florida, USA	not typical of one population because the
	24 Jul 1992		distributions varies from year to year (see
	4 Jun 1994		discussion in Frazer, 1989, who proposed that
	23 Jun 1994		nesting intervals are typical of one population).
	3 Jul 1994		
	<i>East Atlantic Captures</i>		
G41420/ G45918	26 Jun 1994	29 Oct 1994	5 number of years between the two first nesting
		Spain	seasons and between the las two is significantly
G45041/ G46738	26 Jun 1994	30 May 1995	11 correlated (figure 5, $r = -0.216$, $p = 0.042$). The
		Morocco	number of years between two nesting seasons is
G46279	21 Jul 1992	20 May 1995	10 inversely related to the number of years between the
	5 Aug 1992	France	previous ones. This could be a compensatory
	17 Jun 1994		strategy, suggesting that reproductive output should
	27 Jun 1994		be studied at the level of several nesting seasons.
			However, the correlation is very slight and needs to
			be confirmed with further data.

Table 2. Distribution of the number of years between tagging and return to nest in French Guiana according to the year of tagging. The method of tagging and the tag models are described in the text.

	Num-ber of newly tagged fema-les	Number of tagged females captured per year								
		88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	
T	87	1322	30	3	2	0	1	0	0	0
a	88	5417		1	31	4	5	12	4	2

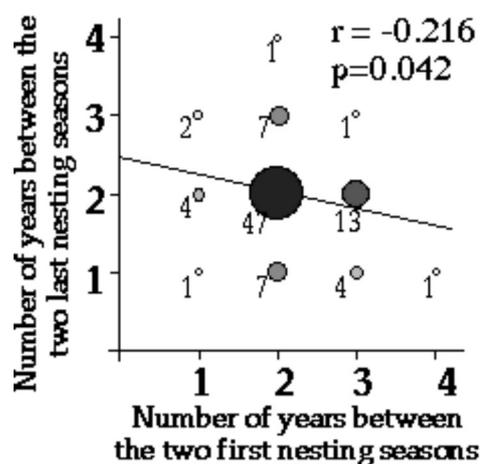


Figure 5. Relationship between two successive nesting intervals for turtles seen at least 3 times.

g	89	5			0	0	0	0	0
g	90	1312				9	119	51	48
i	91	1536					15	118	109
n	92	2662						39	119
g	93	1279							41
y	94	2303							20
e	95	342							
a									
r									

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