

JUVENILE RESEARCH TEAM PROGRAM: ENGAGING THE YOUTH INTO CONSERVATION

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In the Southern Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica the NGO Rescue Center for Endangered Marine Species (CREMA) works side by side with local artisanal fishermen to monitor the sea turtle nesting activity in the community of Bejuco. Of the beaches monitored by CREMA, Playa Bejuco has the second highest nesting activity for Olive Ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). This beach also counts with sporadic nesting of Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and Green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*). This part of the peninsula is isolated, employment opportunities are scarce and school classes inconsistent. In light of this, CREMA has created the Juvenile Research Team Program (JRTP) with the aim of educating, inspiring and creating awareness among young adults of the area. After a pilot that took place in 2016, the 2018 season had the first official JRTP, which was compound by a group of 12 young adults from Bejuco and neighboring communities, with ages ranging from 12 to 16 years old. This program consisted of a total of 19 theoretical and practical classes covering a wide range of topics; sea turtle conservation, mangrove and marine ecosystems, recycling and sustainable consumption, among others. The 2019 program started at the beginning of November and finished in January 2020, 12 participants of the same age range started the program, but only 5 of them completed it. Again, at total of 19 theoretical and practical were conducted and although a similar structure was followed the classes were organized in theme blocks, covering main issues in the area such as incidental catch, plastic pollution and waste management. Considering the big success of the 2018 program, the 2019 JRT finally participated on CREMA's scientific patrols to monitor the sea turtle nesting activity. To conclude, participants developed a research and awareness project, which involved choosing a problematic of the area, in this case the fishing gear waste produced by local fishers and create

solutions and awareness to reduce this threat. This project was presented in a meeting at the end of the program to the rest of the team, parents and community. The ages that this program is aimed to, represent a critical development stage, where main convictions and beliefs are built. Considering this and given the remoteness of the area and lack of leisure opportunities, this type of experiential educational programs can be an effective approach to inspire and engage the youth. This program was originally inspired by the one imparted by the Sea Turtle Conservancy, which shows the importance of sharing with other conservation organizations.