

Cofán Indians' monitoring of freshwater turtles in Zábalo, Ecuador

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Abstract. The Cofán Indians of Aguarico and Zábalo Rivers in Ecuador in 1990 began a turtle recuperation effort by raising turtle hatchlings (*Podocnemis expansa* and *P. unifilis*), in small pools. To evaluate the effectiveness of this program, the Cofán developed and tested three methods to document changes in the populations of turtles. The first method consisted of interviews with people from neighbouring communities about their perceptions of changes in turtle abundance. The second method was a direct count of turtles observed along the rivers from canoe. The third method was an indirect count, involving turtle nest censusing along community beaches. Two of the methods yielded numerical, statistically positive turtle population trends. The turtle program has influenced the community's perception of turtle conservation issues so that instead of hunting the adults and eggs, they now protect them. The training in record-keeping permits them to make a transparent history of the equitability of access to the turtle egg resource. The Cofán monitoring experience strengthened their successful petition to the Ecuadorian government for the rights to manage their territorial lands within the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, and to receive protected area status and management rights to other ancestral lands. The experience gained by the Zábalo monitors is now serving as a model for the design and implementation of the park monitoring system of the newly-established Cofán Park Ranger Corps, which will be patrolling three Ecuadorian Ecological Reserves which overlap Cofán inhabited areas.

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