



DARWIN ANEGADA



The Newsletter of the Darwin Initiative Assessment of the Coastal Biodiversity of Anegada, BVI

<http://www.seaturtle.org/mtrg/projects/anegada/>

Issue 1, January 2004



ROYAL
BOTANIC
GARDENS
KEW



Why Anegada?

Anegada is one of the largest unspoilt islands in the Caribbean. It hosts a globally important coral reef system and is a regionally important area for nesting and foraging sea turtles and birds. Anegada is home to some plants found nowhere else in the world.

What is the Darwin Initiative?

The Darwin Initiative is a UK Government programme that aims to promote biodiversity conservation and implementation of the Biodiversity Convention. The Initiative is funded and administered by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (Defra) and was launched at the Rio Summit in 1992. A strong feature of Darwin projects is the involvement of partners within host communities to better ensure lasting benefits from the work. More detailed information about the Darwin Initiative can be found at their website (<http://www.darwin.gov.uk>).

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A New Project!

Welcome to the first edition of the Newsletter of the Darwin Initiative Assessment of the Coastal Biodiversity of Anegada, BVI. This will be the first of a series, informing you of how the Darwin project on Anegada is progressing and we hope you will find it interesting. The overall aims of this project are to document and monitor the birds, plants and sea turtles of Anegada; to provide institutional strengthening and capacity building; and promotion of the uniqueness of Anegada. This project is a joint effort co-ordinated by the Marine Turtle Research Group at the University of Exeter (MTRG) in consortium with the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (Kew) and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), in the UK, and National Parks Trust (NPT), Conservation and Fisheries Department (CFD), Governor's Office and H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC) in the BVI. The project is being run in partnership with the Anegada community and we are pleased to have Rondel Smith, Damon Wheatley and Jim White as part of the project team.



Tagging hawksbill turtles for release (from left: Nancy Woodfield (NPT), Arlington Pickering (CFD), Damon Wheatley (Anegada Community), Gary Frett (CFD)).

Monitoring Anegada's Biodiversity

The first 5 weeks of field work were undertaken in November and December of 2003 accomplishing a great deal:

Birds

The status of bird populations in much of the Caribbean is poorly known although it is a key avian diversity hotspot holding large numbers of endemic species and seven Endemic Bird Areas. The avifauna of the British Virgin Islands has received relatively little scientific attention. It is possible that Anegada may hold important populations of the globally threatened West Indian whistling-duck and other Restricted Range Species such as the piping plover; the island is also likely to be regionally important for breeding seabirds and migrant waterbirds.

We aim to develop standardised monitoring schemes for landbirds, seabirds and waterbirds, on Anegada. Initial fieldwork in November 2003 was geared at obtaining an idea of what species were present as well as assessing which census techniques would be most effective in the future. We systematically visited all the different habitat types in Anegada and recorded the abundance of each species. This information will help us to plan and implement a thorough monitoring protocol. In total, we recorded 65 different species from 23 bird families;

a high degree of avian diversity for such a small, low-lying island. The full bird list can be accessed on the project website.

Turtles

At least three marine turtle species are known to nest on Anegada (the hawksbill, green and leatherback turtle) but the knowledge relating to the status and ecology of these populations is lacking. The project will ascertain the distribution and abundance of nesting as well as undertaking an extensive inwater sampling study in order to find out information about the distribution and abundance of foraging turtle populations in the reef habitat.

As part of avian and plant fieldwork in November we carried out a detailed survey of the entire coastline of Anegada and, although outside the marine turtle breeding season, we found evidence of past turtle nesting activity and one recently hatched nest. The nest was located on the north coast of Anegada east of Flash of Beauty but had hatched with such a high hatching success (99%) that we were unable to determine the species although nest depth suggested that it was likely to have been a green turtle clutch.



Conducting a Bird Census on Anegada in the rain! (From Left: Colin Clubbe, Kew; Geoff Hilton, RSPB; Esther Georges, NPT).

The in water turtle study got off to a great start with turtles being caught on each of 15 sampling days. We tagged and released 71 individuals: 58 hawksbill turtles and 13 green turtles. We also managed to gain biometric data and tissue samples from a further 6 turtles caught by local fisherman. Tissue samples, collected from all captured turtles, will allow us to do genetic analysis as part of the Defra/FCO funded Turtles in the Caribbean Overseas Territories initiative (TCOT). This will allow us to determine the origin of the turtles in the waters of Anegada.

Plants

Until a recent Darwin project involving NPT and Kew was conducted, the flora of the British Virgin Islands was, until recently, poorly known. The previous project documented the vegetation of the limestone interior of the western end of Anegada and identified 5 globally significant plant species. Three of these species are known to occur in coastal sites: *Acacia anegadensis* and *Metastelma anegadaense* (both Anegada endemics) and *Cordia rupicola*, a Puerto Rican bank endemic thought to have been extirpated from its only other known site in Puerto Rico. This project aims to fully document these critically endangered species within the context of defining coastal habitat types and the full plant diversity associated with these habitats.

During fieldwork in November we completed the classification and mapping of the different coastal vegetation types around the entire coastline. Significant inroads were also made into constructing a vegetation map for the whole island. Voucher specimen collection was a major part of the terrestrial fieldwork and the Darwin Plant



Raymond Walker of BVI National Parks Trust prepares plant specimens for the Darwin Plant Reference Collection.

Reference Collection at JR O'Neal Botanic Garden, Tortola was initiated with specimens of the many different plants of Anegada being collected. Specimens were also collected in order to enhance the reference collection at Kew. The Darwin Initiative Seed Bank, with co-funding from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was also established. Seeds will be stored at the Botanic Garden in Tortola and the Millennium Seedbank at RBG Kew, Wakehurst Place. Finally, we began mapping the locations of the critically endangered plant species on Anegada as well as some species that are known to be invasive.

Promoting Biodiversity

Increasing environmental awareness and local community involvement are integral components of all Darwin Initiative projects. It is our aim through instruments such as this newsletter to ensure the local community is as involved as much as possible and to provide its members with all the information they need to make informed decisions about biodiversity in Anegada. In order to achieve this we plan to carry out a series of public meetings and talks aimed at discussing the project and how people can become involved. We have had positive feedback from the public meetings held to date.

We will be closely involved with the school in Anegada at every stage of the project and are also keen to bring the resources and information of the project to other school groups in the BVI. Project staff have already visited St Mary's Primary School on Virgin Gorda. This proved to be one of the highlights of the trip. Teachers please contact us!



Team training in bird identification. (From left: Rondel Smith (Anegada Community); Geoff Hilton (RSPB); Dylan Penn (CFD)).



Releasing turtles (From left: Shannon Gore and Dylan Penn (CFD); Jim White (Anegada Community). Back: Andy McGowan (Darwin Research Fellow)).

One of our project partners is HLSCC and we hope that students will be involved in the project on many different levels. To date UK project staff have given two seminars: Marine Turtle Conservation and Plant Ecology.

The Darwin fieldwork in November also proved to be highly successful in raising awareness of the Darwin Initiative project in the BVI through the media. Over the course of the initial five weeks of fieldwork, four separate national press articles were published and three main features appeared on VITV as well as several radio features broadcast.

Institutional Strengthening

Part of the project will be four training workshops in biodiversity and monitoring techniques led by biodiversity specialists from the UK and BVI. These workshops will be undertaken in the BVI involving a wide range of staff and student trainees from project partner organisations and other interested parties and will involve both theoretical and practical sessions. The first of these workshops "Methods for Assessing the Biodiversity of Anegada" was undertaken 18th-25th November 2003.

The workshop began with two days of classroom sessions hosted in the new Marine Science Centre at H. Lavity Stoutt Community College. Sessions were lead by Andy McGowan (MTRG; outlining the Darwin Project), Colin Clubbe (Kew; plant identification and conservation), Brendan Godley (MTRG; marine turtle research methods), Geoff Hilton (RSPB; avian biodiversity and conservation) and Steve Alton (Kew; seed banking). This was followed by 5 days of fieldwork where 15 BVI participants received hands-on practical training in the monitoring techniques that will be used throughout the 2.5 year project. Workshop participants included representatives from all partner organisations and three members of the Anegadian Community: Rondel Smith, Damon Wheatley and Jim White. All participants were given exposure to all aspects of the field work.

This Darwin project is jointly steered by a committee of representatives of all BVI and UK project partners. The Darwin Anegada Steering Group met twice during the first bolus of field work and enabled all partners to keep up to date with project developments and have input into the planing of future initiatives.

How Can You Help?

If you would like to find out more about the project and view more pictures of the team in action you can visit our website:

<http://www.seaturtle.org/mtrg/projects/anegada>.

If you are interested in sponsoring future issues of this newsletter please contact us directly (see details below). As part of the project, local Anegadians are employed and assist in the monitoring and research. Already the willingness to be involved has outstripped available resources and we are appealing for more support. There is unlimited work to be done and your help is most appreciated.

Through our partnership with US Based 501c(3) registered non-profit conservation organisation SEATURTLE.ORG we are able to accept donations online. All donations will be collated by SEATURTLE.ORG and paid once full accounting for spending has been received. 100% of all monies donated will be spent directly on the biodiversity of Anegada.

For your donation you will receive:

- A Certificate of Support.
- An acknowledgement on the project website for 6 months.
- An acknowledgement in a subsequent Darwin Anegada Newsletter.
- All subsequent Darwin Anegada Newsletters.
- Corporate donors of more than \$250 may have their logo displayed on the website and as a sponsor in future Darwin Anegada Newsletters



Andy McGowan, Darwin Research Fellow, talks turtle with the children of St Mary's Primary School, Virgin Gorda.

The website will be updated regularly throughout the project, including the hosting of an electronic copy of all newsletters in full colour. If you would like to be notified of project updates then you can sign up to our e-mail circulation list at the web site. We hope that you enjoyed reading this edition of the newsletter and will continue to support us in our important work in what is a very special and unique place.



Participants of the Second Darwin Anegada Project Steering Committee: Back row (from left): Joseph Smith-Abbott (NPT), Bertrand Lettsome (CFD), Andy McGowan (MTRG), Mark Hayward (CFD), Arlington Pickering (CFD), Dylan Penn (CFD), Raymond Walker (NPT). Front row: Colin Clubbe (Kew), Nancy Woodfield (NPT), Shannon Gore (CFD), Orville Phillips (HLSCC). Empty chair and photographer - Brendan Godley (MTRG).

Acknowledgements:

We thank Ms Lucia Frances for her support in getting the project off the ground and are grateful for the warm welcome all in the project were given by the people of Anegada. Many thanks to the businesses of Anegada who have agreed to help disseminate this newsletter. The UK's Marine Conservation Society were kind enough to provide turtle educational materials for children. Finally, the UK and BVI project partners would like to join in thanking Alan Mills for his prominent role in helping to pull the project consortium together. With thanks to the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum for circulating this to its members.

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