

Students help tag turtles

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Cayman Prep and High School students Stacie Sybersma and Olivia Benjamin and Davidson College student Cody Elder spent the day tagging wild green sea turtles during their recent work experience with the Department of Environment.

This groundbreaking study, funded by the Darwin Initiative and carried out by the Department of Environment, will reveal the origins of young green turtles in the Cayman Islands, states a press release.

"Most people don't know that the small green turtles we see in Cayman waters have already travelled thousands of miles from the beaches where they hatched," said Janice Blumenthal of the Department of Environment.

"Full-grown turtles weigh about 300 pounds and are more than three feet long. In the Cayman Islands, our nesting female turtles are extremely endangered and are unrelated to the young turtles we often see in our waters."

The project team is carrying out a genetic study to reveal where these young turtles come from. Department of Environment staff and volunteers catch turtles, attach tags, and collect small samples for genetic analysis. "We can extract DNA from a few drops of blood or a tiny sliver of tissue," explained Ms Blumenthal.

After tagging, weighing and measuring, and collecting samples, turtles are released unharmed.

Samples will be analysed in the UK at the University of Exeter Cornwall Campus and Department of Environment researchers will use the turtles' DNA as a kind of genetic barcode, allowing them to determine the countries where the turtles were born.

Along with making the research results available to policy-makers and the scientific community, the project aims to raise awareness. "Educating young people is an important objective of the Darwin Initiative and the Department of Environment," explained Ms. Blumenthal.

According to Mrs Arthurlyn Pedley, Guidance Councilor at Cayman Prep and High School, "Work experience is an important part of the Prep School curriculum. We are pleased that our students had the opportunity to learn about careers in natural resource management and participate in exciting this research."

"I enjoyed my time at the Department of Environment very much," said student Olivia Benjamin. "My favorite part of my work experience was catching turtles and looking for turtle nest on the beaches. It was a great experience for me." Stacie Sybersma added "I had an amazing time working with DoE. It was great because I got to get right in there and I learned a lot about the different types of turtles. In catching turtles, I learned how to tag them and why it is important to do it. It is important for the environment, and the offspring of future turtles."



Stacie Sybersma and Cody Elder release a tagged turtle.