

Grupo Atmar celebrates 22 years protecting sea turtles ^[1]

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At the center, the president and founder of Atmar, Luis Crespo, together with volunteers Zenaida Burgos and Francisco Sánchez. (WANDA LIZ VEGA)

Reaping the fruits of their work for the protection of the leatherback turtles, hawksbill turtles, and green sea turtles, and they are committed to continue recruiting volunteers for their initiatives.

Stopping the illegal hunting of sea turtles, the plundering of their nests and the theft of their eggs has been the goal of a group of friends from Maunabo who, since 2001, have been engaged in research on the populations of these endangered species and the alternatives to preserve them.

Luis Crespo, Ramón Arroyo, Hilda Colón, Israel Márquez and Juan Velázquez founded the community organization Amigos de las Tortugas Marinas (Atmar) and, 22 years later, they are satisfied to know that their efforts have borne fruit.

"The leatherback population is declining drastically throughout the Atlantic Ocean, at a rate of 4% annually, but Maunabo has remained stable and we are currently one of the main nesting sites for leatherbacks in Puerto Rico," said Crespo, president and founder of Atmar.

On the coasts of Playa Larga and Playa California, in Maunabo, there are an average of 250 nests of tinglars per year, although other species, such as the hawksbill and the green sea turtle (peje blanco), have taken this southeastern town as a nesting site.

"To say 250 nests does not mean 250 turtles, because a female leatherback can nest 10 times. So we estimate that here, the population per season is about 25 to 30, so we would have about 60 females nesting here, which is not much," Crespo said, after pointing out that in the first year of Atmar's operation, they registered 157 leatherback nests between the two beaches.

"Of the hawksbill, we have 139 nests, which is a very good number because, of all the sea turtles, it is the one whose population is in the worst condition," he added.

As for the green sea turtle, Crespo mentioned that there was "a phenomenon" when, in 2012, they registered the first nest of this species in Maunabo. "It was a great surprise, because the only place where green turtle nests were registered was in Vieques and Mona. At the moment, they began to appear here and we have already had 31 nests," he said.

~~Parte de lo que se exhibe en el lugar.~~
Part of what is exhibited at the site (WANDA LIZ VEGA).

To date, a total of 20 volunteers have joined Atmar's initiatives. The group, among other things, guards the coasts of their municipality, watches over the nests and educates the population to learn to respect and protect these species that are under threat of disappearing.

Since 2013, the organization has had an educational center that was established thanks to diverse contributions. The center, located in the Emajaguas neighborhood of Maunabo, has a museum, a conference room and rooms for resident students, who participate in research with volunteers.

Atmar was able to expand its community project to Yabucoa in 2007, and also created the Sol, Arena y Tortugas Marinas (Sun, Sand and Sea Turtles) program to impact schools in the municipality and spread the message of awareness.

Al día de hoy, un total de 20 voluntarios se han sumado a las iniciativas encaminadas por Atmar. El grupo, entre otras funciones, custodia las costas de su municipio, vela los nidos y educa a la población para que aprenda a respetar y proteger a estas especies amenazadas con desaparecer.

La organización cuenta, desde 2013, con un centro educativo que fue habilitado gracias a diversas donaciones. En el lugar, ubicado en el barrio Emajaguas, de Maunabo, tienen un museo, un salón de conferencias y habitaciones para estudiantes residentes, quienes participan en investigaciones en conjunto con los voluntarios.

Asimismo, Atmar logró expandir su proyecto comunitario a Yabucoa, en 2007, y –además– creó el programa Sol, Arena y Tortugas Marinas, para impactar las escuelas del municipio y llevar el mensaje de concienciación.

"Every year the group comes once a month and we give them educational talks. The objective is to educate the next generation that will continue our work," said Crespo about the idea that has been shared with students from the Higinio Figueroa Villegas middle school.

Those who wish to visit the turtle museum can visit them (in small groups) on weekends, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Likewise, if you would like to contribute financially so that this group can continue to expand its efforts, you can do so by entering their web page www.tortugasmaunabo.com [3].

"Todos los años viene el grupo, una vez al mes, y les damos charlas. El objetivo es buscar el pase de batón", sostuvo Crespo sobre la idea que ha sido compartida con estudiantes de la escuela intermedia Higinio Figueroa Villegas.

Una especie preservada en un frasco.

A species preserved in a jar. (WANDA LIZ VEGA)

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