

PhD Dissertation Defense

Candidate: Emily L. Cella

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Title: Understanding Residents' Knowledge of, Attitudes Toward, and Participation in Sea Turtle Conservation in Tortuguero, Costa Rica and Near the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, Florida, USA

Committee: Dr. E.C.M. Parsons (Dissertation Director), Dr. Gregory Guagnano, Dr. Larry Rockwood, Dr. Lee M. Talbot

ABSTRACT

Tortuguero, Costa Rica and the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge (ACNWR), Florida, USA represent two critically important sea turtle nesting sites where habitat preservation has been established for many years. In 2014, questionnaires were completed by residents living adjacent to the ACNWR ($N = 131$) and by Tortuguero residents ($N = 132$) in order to: (1) analyze which demographic characteristics explain the Tortuguero and the ACNWR residents' knowledge of, attitudes toward, willingness to act for, and participation in sea turtle conservation; and (2) investigate the differences between the two locations regarding these facets of sea turtle conservation. Overall, survey responses for both Tortuguero and the ACNWR reflected strong positive attitudes toward sea turtles. The analyses for Tortuguero concluded that although facets of ecotourism play a large role in cultivating sea turtle knowledge and participation in sea turtle conservation, other demographics in the broader community significantly matter as well, and that the role of peer-to-peer communication is important in promoting positive attitudes toward sea turtles. The analyses for the ACNWR concluded that residents' main source of sea turtle information (being a NGO or government agency) frequently played a significant role in shaping residents' knowledge of, attitude toward, willingness to volunteer for, and participation in sea turtle conservation. Compared to the ACNWR residents, this study revealed that Tortuguero residents had significantly higher

knowledge of, willingness to act for, and participation in sea turtle conservation; however, similarities were found with regard to their general attitudes toward sea turtles. The reasons why Tortuguero had greater outcomes were attributed to demographic, cultural, and economic factors. Specifically, this study demonstrated that ecotourism in Tortuguero predominantly accounted for residents' higher sea turtle-related knowledge; willingness to donate money to help sea turtle conservation; participation in sea turtle-related activities; and participation in helping to protect sea turtles (on their own, non-agency sponsored time). On a broader level, these results illustrate that community-based ecotourism can lead to higher pro-species conservation behaviors and participation in species conservation among the local community than non-ecotourism based conservation strategies.