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# LOGGERHEAD TURTLE DENSITY AND ABUNDANCE ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST OF THE BAJA CALIFORNIA PENINSULA (MEXICO), DETERMINED THROUGH AERIAL SURVEYS: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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Loggerhead turtles, *Caretta caretta*, are highly migratory and use a wide range of broadly separated localities and habitats during their lifetime. In the North Pacific, loggerheads carry out an extensive developmental migration, often traveling from nesting areas in Japan to distant developmental and foraging habitats in the eastern Pacific. Loggerhead turtles in the Pacific are adversely impacted by a variety of activities including incidental capture in commercial fisheries, boat strikes, debris ingestion, and intentional harvest. These impacts have prompted calls for increased research and protection of loggerheads in this region. To address this need, we carried out aerial surveys for loggerhead turtles along the Pacific Coast of the Baja California Peninsula, Mexico – an area long thought to be critical habitat for juveniles. The project was a US- Mexico binational effort with cooperating institutions from government, academic, and nongovernmental sectors. Surveys were carried out from September to October 2005 and encompassed nearly 7,000 km of track-line with offshore extents to 170 km. More than 400 turtles were sighted. Loggerheads were the most prevalent (77% of all sightings). Olive ridleys (12%), green turtles (7%), and leatherback turtles (<1 %) were also sighted. Approximately 4% of all turtle sightings were unidentified. We estimate 10's of thousands of loggerhead turtles were present in the spatial and temporal scope of these surveys. Combined with our ongoing water-based demographic studies and satellite telemetry efforts, this project has further demonstrated the value of Baja California's Pacific Coast for loggerhead turtles.

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