Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology 482 (2016) 33–37

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jembe

The effects of large beach debris on nesting sea turtles

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 December 2015
Received in revised form 19 April 2016
Accepted 20 April 2016
Available online 7 May 2016

Keywords:
Beach debris
False crawl
Habitat restoration
Nesting
Sea turtle

ABSTRACT

A field experiment was conducted to understand the effects of large beach debris on sea turtle nesting behavior as well as the effectiveness of large debris removal for habitat restoration. Large natural and anthropogenic debris were removed from one of three sections of a sea turtle nesting beach and distributions of nests and false crawls (non-nesting crawls) in pre- (2011–2012) and post- (2013–2014) removal years in the three sections were compared. The number of nests increased 200% and the number of false crawls increased 55% in the experimental section, whereas a corresponding increase in number of nests and false crawls was not observed in the other two sections where debris removal was not conducted. The proportion of nest and false crawl abundance in all three beach sections was significantly different between pre- and post-removal years. The nesting success, the percent of successful nests in total nesting attempts (number of nests + false crawls), also increased from 24% to 38%; however the magnitude of the increase was comparably small because both the number of nests and false crawls increased, and thus the proportion of the nesting success in the experimental beach in pre- and post-removal years was not significantly different. The substantial increase in sea turtle nesting activities after the removal of large debris indicates that large debris may have an adverse impact on sea turtle nesting behavior. Removal of large debris could be an effective restoration strategy to improve sea turtle nesting.

1. Introduction

Coastal areas provide critical habitats for a variety of wildlife, and conservation of this habitat is essential to maintaining high coastal biodiversity. Accelerated loss and degradation of coastal habitats by anthropogenic and natural forces have been major threats for the populations that rely on these habitats (Defeo et al., 2009). Marine debris has been identified as one source of habitat degradation and threat to coastal and marine species (Laist, 1997). Marine debris can result from various human activities, such as intense development and increased recreational use of coastal habitats, commercial fisheries, and use of other ocean based resources by rapidly expanding human populations, and natural events such as currents and tropical weather systems (Ribic et al., 2010). Debris that enters the ocean environment can be transported by ocean currents for long distances and then deposited on coastlines or ocean floors (Sheavly and Register, 2007).

Many studies provide evidence of the negative impacts of marine debris on coastal and marine species (see Gall and Thompson, 2015 for review). Sea turtles are among those 690 species whose populations have been affected by marine debris; six of all seven turtle species are affected (Laist, 1997). Death, injuries, and stranding of sea turtles as a result of accidental ingestion of and entanglement by marine debris are well documented (Laist, 1997; Schuyler et al., 2014). However, debris not only impacts turtles in the water but also on the beaches. Sea turtles spend most of their lives at sea, but they rely on sandy beaches for reproduction. During the nesting season, females emerge from the water to deposit clutches of eggs in the sand. Occasionally, turtles emerge from the water but do not deposit a clutch, and this is termed a false crawl (Miller, 1997). Presence of large debris on a beach could interrupt nesting activities by turtles causing false crawls. Frequent abortion or disruption on nesting attempts by leatherback turtles was observed in a beach in Gabon in Central Africa where active industrial logging caused accumulation of logs on the beach (Laurence et al., 2008). Additionally, nest placement may be affected by debris which could affect hatching success (Hays and Speakman, 1993). Large debris may act as sea walls and prevent adult and hatchling turtles from traversing the beach. Witherington et al. (2011) showed turtles nested closer to the water in areas where sea walls were present as compared to areas without walls. Another study in Gabon indicated that logs on the beach, combined with artificial lights, caused disorientation for leatherback hatchlings (Bourgeois et al., 2009).

The objective of this study was to examine how large debris influences the nesting behavior of sea turtles and to assess the effectiveness of large debris removal as a restoration activity to improve sea turtle nesting habitat. A field experiment was conducted to compare the relative abundance of nests and false crawls before and after large debris removal from a portion of a loggerhead turtle nesting beach.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jembe.2016.04.005
0022-0981/

2. Material and methods

2.1. Study area

This study was conducted along approximately 5.7 km of beach on Eglin Air Force Base property on Cape San Blas in northwest Florida (Fig. 1). This area represents the southern tip of the St. Joseph Peninsula in Gulf County, Florida, and supports one of the greatest nesting densities of loggerhead sea turtles in the northern Gulf of Mexico, where a severe decline in loggerhead nests highlights the need for nesting habitat conservation (Lamont and Carthy, 2007; Lamont et al., 2012).

The study area has distinct sections due to the bathymetry and current dynamics of the region. The eastern portion of the study site is an accreting beach that is relatively wide, whereas beaches in the remaining parts of the study area are narrower and eroding (Lamont and Carthy, 2007; Lamont and Houser, 2014). Man-made and natural debris have accumulated in the study area over time. Man-made debris includes construction materials such as concrete, pipes, and metal fencing that remained on the beach after demolition of old military structures. Most of the natural debris is coarse woody debris (CWD), including fallen trees and stumps, which is a result of the beach eroding into the adjacent stand of pine flatwoods.

The study beach was divided into three sections: north, middle, and east (Fig. 1). The north (1.3 km) and middle (1.7 km) beaches represent narrow, eroded, and high debris-density beaches. All debris in the north beach was natural debris from the adjacent stand, whereas the middle beach had a mixture of natural and man-made debris. The east beach (2.7 km) represented a comparably well-preserved beach with a smaller amount of debris and a larger beach width.

2.2. Nesting and debris surveys and debris removal

Sea turtle nest surveys were conducted every morning during the nesting season from May 1 through September 1, 2011–2014 (two nesting seasons in each pre- and post-debris removal conditions) on foot, by ATV, or by using a 4-wheel drive vehicle. All turtle crawls were identified to species and the location of each nest and false crawl was recorded using a hand-held GPS.

The type, GPS locations, and size (area) of all large emergent debris on the beach that required mechanical removal were recorded from June–August, 2012. The Marine Debris Act (33 USC 1951 et seq. as amended by Title VI of Public Law 112–213) defines marine debris as "*Any persistent solid material that is manufactured or processed and directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, disposed of or abandoned into the marine environment or Great Lakes.*" However, because the focus of our study was physical site occupancy by debris, both man-made and natural debris on the beach were measured. Sandy beach areas representing potential turtle nesting sites were delineated by taking GPS measurements along the dune/vegetation line and shoreline at low tide. All emergent debris in the middle beach, except for a large concrete pad that broke the excavator, were removed by heavy machinery in December 2012, outside of the nesting/hatching seasons for sea turtles and shorebirds, to minimize the disturbance to those species.

2.3. Analysis

A 45 × 45 m grid shapefile which covers the sandy beach area between the shoreline and dune line in all three sections (north, middle and east) of the study area was created using ArcGIS 10.3 (Fig. 2). Grid cells were removed if more than half of their area was outside of the sandy beach. The number of debris, areas of debris coverage, and numbers of loggerhead nests and false crawls in each grid cell were calculated. The correlation (r) between the nesting parameters (number of nests and false crawls) and the debris amount and coverage areas was assessed.

The number of nests in each beach section during the nesting season for pre- (2011–2012) and post- (2013–2014) debris removal conditions was determined. The reason that two years of survey data in each condition (pre- and post-debris removal) were used for analysis was to capture some inter-annual variability in number of nesting sea turtles (Godley et al., 2001). Using chi-square tests for difference in proportion, it was examined whether distribution of turtle nests and false crawls in the three beach sections changed after removing large debris from the middle beach. Nesting success was defined as the proportion of nesting crawls to total number of crawls (number of nesting crawls + number of false crawls). Using the pre- and post-removal data in the middle beach, where large debris was removed, a chi-square test was conducted to examine whether the proportion of successful nesting attempts changed.

3. Results

In total 643 pieces of debris (77 pieces in the north, 483 pieces in the middle, and 20 pieces in the east beaches), were located and measured. These debris covered 2047.9 m^2, or 0.77% of the study area (Fig. 2A). The majority (624 of 643) were natural debris, covering 94% of the debris-covered area. The most frequently observed debris was CWD; therefore each piece of debris was typically long and narrow, with a mean length and width of 5.8 m and 0.5 m respectively. The density

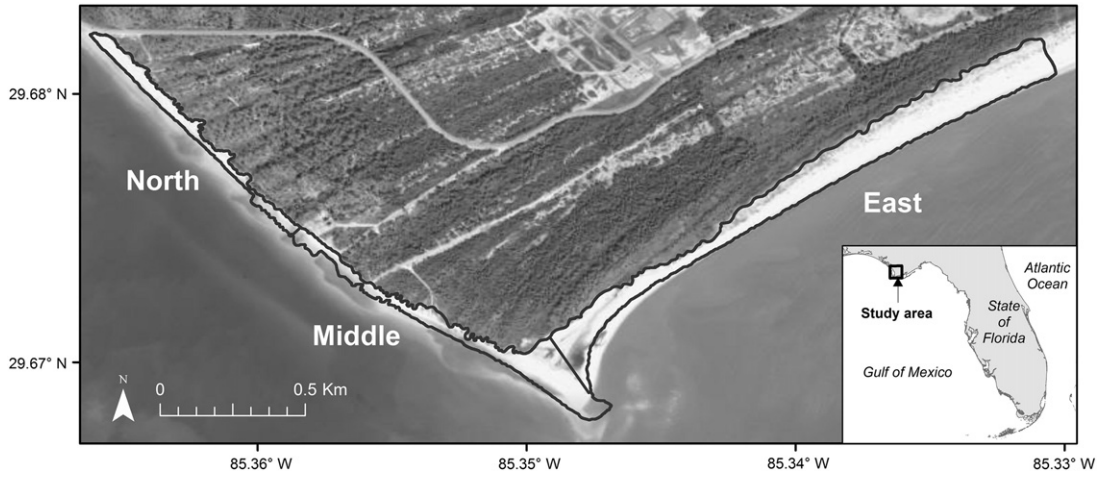

Fig. 1. Map of Cape San Blas in St. Joseph Peninsula, Florida, in which the boundary of the three beach sections (north, middle, and east) of the study area is shown. The inset box shows the location of the study area within the state of Florida, USA.