

## Project Update: October 2019

We recently finished our annual monitoring of marine megafauna in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. This marks the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of data collection on large piscivorous fish and marine turtles around the islands. This year we were able to more extensively use scientific longlines around the islands, providing new data on the distribution and demographics of sharks around Bocas. Though data are still being analysed, we observed lower overall fish diversity and abundance compared to previous years, especially with larger shark species. Anecdotal information from local fishers suggest that warmer than usual waters around the islands this year may be affecting the distribution of fish, which may be seeking deeper, cooler waters and therefore more difficult to observe and catch. Excitingly we did have observations of two species of elasmobranchs that we had not previously recorded for Bocas del Toro - the lesser electric ray (*Narcine bancroftii*) and the sharpnose shark (*Rhizoprionodon* sp.) – seen during a transect and caught on a scientific longline, respectively. Through the use of longline we also identified what may be a nursery site for blacktip sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) in the region, though more long-term data will be needed to further assess the importance of this site for these juvenile sharks.

This year included a fisher exchange between local Bocas fishers and MarAlliance Community Field Coordinator and Belize artisanal fisher, Hilmar Salazar. Besides further training our local fisher field team in monitoring methods and the safe handling of sharks, Hilmar and National Coordinator, Megan Chevis, participated in a fisher workshop focusing on sustainable fisheries organized by the NGO Darklands Foundation. Over 30 fishers (including several women fishers) from five islands in the archipelago participated in the workshop, which covered topics including megafauna monitoring, sustainable fisheries, marine protected areas, the control and use of invasive lionfish, and economic alternatives to support fishing.

