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Novel Project in Costa Rican Pacific Beach Town Helps Protect Sea Turtles

by Guest

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[The author is a correspondent for National Public Radio who is currently covering sustainable development issues in Central America and Mexico as part of a project supported by the Ford Foundation. The following article is reprinted by permission.]

Ostional, Costa Rica. In a small coastal village in Costa Rica, protecting endangered sea turtles begins in a funky, thatch-roofed cantina called Las Brisas del Pacifico, where a bus driver named Ricardo is sitting belly-up to the bar. "They're delicious," he says, holding up a glass filled with two egg yolks, "and they give an active man more potency, they make him more erect." With a practiced motion, Ricardo tosses down the eggs and slams the glass on the bar. "Excellent. I want two, three, four, 20 more. I could drink them all night." The age-old belief in the aphrodisiac power of turtle eggs sustains a thriving black market for the forbidden ovum throughout Latin America. Most countries have banned the collection of these eggs because the world's eight sea turtle species are endangered by disease, incidental capture in fishing nets, disturbance of nesting areas, and poaching of eggs and turtles.

But in the coastal town of Ostional, located on Costa Rica's Guanacaste Peninsula, a 13-year-old project has helped stabilize the population of the olive ridley sea turtle. The government has, in essence, legalized poaching. For 10 months of the year, usually around the third quarter of the moon, olive ridleys swim by the hundreds of thousands to a single mile of beach at Ostional in an ancient reproductive rite little understood by scientists. They scuttle onto the sand, dig a hole with their flippers, and drop in an average of 100 leathery, white eggs the size of pingpong balls.

Over the course of a five-day "arribada," literally, an arrival, nesting females will leave as many as 10 million eggs in the black, volcanic sand. Mass nesting is nature's way of ensuring that after the turkey vultures, feral dogs, and raccoons have eaten all the fresh eggs they want, there will be enough left over to produce a sustainable population of olive ridleys.

In the early 1980s, scientists learned that, because of limited space on the beach, females arriving later destroy the first laid eggs. The researchers wondered: why not let poachers have the doomed eggs? "What we have done is turn people into predators," says Dr. Anny Chavez, a sea turtle biologist and one of the founders of the Ostional project, which is world famous among turtle activists.

Under a law written especially for Ostional, the government allows an egg-harvesting cooperative to collect all they can during the first 36 hours of every arribada. Co-op members then truck the eggs around the country, selling them to bars and restaurants. In return, the community must protect the olive ridley. Co-op members clean debris from the nesting areas and patrol the beach day and night

for poachers. Forty days later, when the hatchlings emerge, children from the Ostional primary school run to the beach. "We protect the tortugas when they crawl to the ocean. If we don't, the vultures will get them and bite their heads off," says a local 8-year-old boy, breathlessly.

Some visitors are still horrified at the sight of scores of people scurrying around the beach, happily looting sea turtle nests. "The first thing they ask is, 'Why take the eggs?'" says the co-op's staff biologist, Jorge Ballesterro. "But when they see the turtles destroying other eggs, it's easier to understand." Were it not for this peculiar blessing of nature, Ostional would be another drowsy, dirt-poor Central American beach town. But Ostional is one of only four beaches on the Pacific Ocean that hosts these spectacular arribadas. The beach fills up with so many olive-colored shells "it looks like a subway at rush hour," says Chavez. During one memorable arribada, the turtles kept coming right up into town, blocking the main road. "We had to put down logs to keep them on the beach. They were everywhere," recalls one resident. Olive ridleys are the smallest about the size of a manhole cover and the most abundant of the world's sea turtles.

But scientists cannot say with certainty whether Ostional contributes to their stable population. Some researchers believe it is the arribadas, rather than protection, that give the olive ridley the greatest survival advantage. At the least, however, they can say that organized egg harvests don't hurt the olive ridley as much as uncontrolled poaching does. The most tangible benefit of the Ostional project accrues not to the turtles, but to people. After every arribada, each one of the 200 co-op members earns about US\$75. "Without the eggs it would be a hard life. There isn't any work here. Without the turtles, we're lost," says Alexander Briones, one of 12 directors of the cooperative. What's more, the association has used profits from egg sales to build a new school and health center, renovate the church, and improve the streets. But has success spoiled Ostional?

For the past year, Ostional has been engulfed in a nasty, small-town feud between the egg harvesting co-op and the resident biologists over the misuse of turtle-egg income and scientific spoils. The conflict broke out last year when the husband-and-wife team biologist Anny Chavez and Leslie du Toit, a South African sea turtle enthusiast began building a small hotel at the research station on the edge of town where they live. The couple wants to begin charging students and researchers for lodging and lab space. The community is angry that the two are starting a business on public land; other Costa Rican biologists have also questioned the ethics of the enterprise. Chavez is short, brown-haired, and soft-spoken; du Toit is tall, ponytailed, and outspoken. The couple counters that the town is simply upset over what they've exposed. They charge that co-op directors receive kickbacks from egg retailers and pocket the additional profits. "They're a mafia," says du Toit. "We found out what was happening and told the authorities. Our complaints alienated us." For their part, the egg harvesters clearly do not like the couple watching over their shoulder. "She's a spy," says Irani Castillo, one of the association directors, of Chavez, "she's just like the police."

Says Tomas Chavarria, the town policeman and another co-op director, "They say we lack training. What they're really trying to do is take over administration of the association." Relations have gotten so bad that someone tried to torch the half-built lodge, and a rival biologist has filed suit to stop construction. Moreover, townsfolk have spread rumors about du Toit accusing him of everything from statutory rape to grave robbing all of which he laughs off. "They see us as a threat to their

future of getting this money," he says, sitting inside the half-finished thatch-roofed lodge, which looks out on the Pacific. "It's to the point where we've been accused of trying to shut down the project. It seems there's a kind of mass hysteria." Two other residents echo du Toit's contention that the turtle co-op is corrupt. They say the directors meet constantly and unnecessarily so they can collect hourly wages for the meetings, and if anyone speaks out against this, they're fined. "They try to run the town, I tell you. We're living in Ostional like they do in Cuba," says Gilbert Aviles, exhibiting the local flair for overstatement. Down at the co-op administration building, a director who's attending yet another paid meeting grins and says, "We're human, and we make mistakes."

Randall Arauz, a Costa Rican sea turtle biologist who is working with the egg association, knows there are problems. "Ostional is a small community, they don't have a high degree of education. There is corruption like anywhere," he says. "But the way to stop it is to work with them, not to sit there and point fingers." There's no resolution in sight to the fracas in Ostional. In fact, it's spreading. The University of Costa Rica, two government departments, and the sea turtle biology community have all sided with either the turtle-egg co-op or with Chavez and du Toit. "I think she's obsessed," says Arauz. "She has to be the owner of that project. She alienated the community so now she badmouths them....She won't communicate with locals, or with her colleagues."

Chavez, who helped found the egg-harvest plan, wonders, in retrospect, whether the conflicts could have been avoided. The designers were biologists who understood turtles better than they understood people. "When we started the project, we were worried about the biological basis. We didn't work hard to try and train the community about how to manage this big amount of money. And for me, this is partly our fault," she says. It's important not to lose the big picture. Globally, few efforts to save sea turtles succeed. Moreover, it's hard to find a community-development project in any field where a town has for 10 years been responsibly managing and protecting a valuable resource.

Biologists say that is what sets Ostional apart from other more peaceful, but disappointing, projects around the world. "It's unfortunate that personalities and politics get in the way of a really good idea," says Dr. Steve Cornelius, a respected sea turtle expert, formerly with the World Wildlife Fund. "Ostional sat down and figured out how best to manage a resource. They did that. They agreed to things that have not been accomplished anywhere else." Despite its problems, Ostional continues to serve as a model of sustainable development. Researchers from neighboring Nicaragua and Panama which have their own, smaller arribadas of olive ridleys will soon visit here to find out what they can learn from the successes of Ostional.

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