

Estacion de Tortugas

By Paul Wagner

How do you treat a thousand pound expectant mother? Very carefully! With kid gloves...well, actually, with rubber gloves, for both your and her protection.

The first Baula (leatherback turtle) came ashore about midnight. She was the first of a "Station de Tortugas" record-setting two days. Forty eight turtles came to lay their eggs. It was the same beach each was born on some five or more years ago.

Seven Atenienses were there to assist with their birth. DiNora, Harriet, Paul, Taylor, Julie, Larry, and Isabelle all shared in this great experience! Our van left Atenas at eight o'clock in the morning for the Mawamba dock. The five hour trip took us by van, boat, and on foot to "Estacion de Tortugas", deep in the Tortuguero region of Caribbean Costa Rica. For some, it was their first turtle experience, but the stations' experts quickly and thoroughly explained our mission. We were to patrol two kilometers of beach after dark, supplementing the professional staffs' duties.

Leatherbacks are the largest reptiles on the planet. They sometimes weigh a ton. Their size belies their fragile state, however. They are the most endangered of the eight species of sea turtles, prey to fishermen, sharks, boats, pollution, and that's just at sea. When an adult finishes her trip from Costa Rica to the Caribbean, to the Atlantic, to Nova Scotia, to Iceland, to Western Africa and back to Costa Rica, (to the same beach!) she's now vulnerable to poachers, crabs, seagulls, developers, and bad weather.

We were there to increase the odds of both her egg-laying success and juveniles making the hazardous journey from nest to surf, 60 days later.

"Estacion de Tortugas" has been operating under the direction of Stanley Rodriguez, PHD, for eight years. He's been granted permission to protect more than two kilometers of undeveloped Costa Rican seashore. Without the assistance of donations from individuals, Ecoteach (see their website), and groups like ours, success would be severely hampered.

Stanley and his staff are humble about their success to date. They had more leatherbacks come to nest this year than the other eight sites in Costa Rica...combined! This includes "Parque Nacional Mario Los Baulas" on the Pacific. He and his staff are doing something right!

Our group followed the established procedure. When we spotted a turtle we waited until she had finished digging her 30 inch deep nest in the sand. Then as she began to lay the first of 120 eggs (60 fertile and 60 infertile), we stationed 3 people behind her to catch the eggs in a plastic bag. The turtle didn't turn around or seem to know we were there. One person held the bag, and the other two each held a back flipper to make it easier to catch the eggs. After about an hour, she finished laying, and then she covered the nest with

sand and debris, thinking she was hiding the eggs. After she had filled the hole, she messed up the beach for about fifteen feet all around to confuse predators. Before she headed back to sea, we placed a tag on her back flipper to be able to identify her in the future.

At that point we took the eggs to an identical nest that had been prepared in Stanley's protected nursery. When those eggs hatch, the baby turtles will be protected by an escort on their journey to the sea.

Every night for three nights we gathered and protected turtle eggs. Our work helped build the population of this endangered species, but much more is needed. If you would like to volunteer to go on one of these fascinating and rewarding excursions, please call me or Julie at 446-3069. The cost is only \$100, which includes transportation, food, and lodging for 4 days and 3 nights. A group is now being formed for departure on July 5.