



Travel

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BY CAROL HUANG

Left to fend for themselves, more than 90 percent of hatchlings are picked off by predators before they make it to the ocean off Baja California.

A Mexican Hatch Act

Volunteers Help Give Baby Sea Turtles a Safe Start

By CAROL HUANG
Special to The Washington Post

Visiting a sea turtle nesting site has its perils. You could forget bug spray and spend a significant amount of time scratching yourself. You could hurry toward what looks like a nesting female, only to stumble into the ungodly stench of a rotting sea lion carcass. And when the blessed event finally happens, you could trip over driftwood while scrambling for the perfect picture.

But then there is the wondrous birth of a tiny turtle smaller than your palm. Close to 300 babies hatched when I visited ASUPMATOMA, a marine-turtle sanctuary in Baja California, Mexico, a 20- to 30-minute drive from Cabo San Lucas. The nesting season, which lasts from September to November, was well underway, and volunteers had already relocated eggs from more than 100 nests to a sandy nursery on the beach that was fenced and padlocked against predators and poachers.

The first batch hatched after sunset, making it hard to see not only the newborns as they were released but

also impediments, such as driftwood, to amateur photographers scrambling in the sand. After dinner with other visitors at the beachside camp of ASUPMATOMA (it's the Spanish acronym for Association for the Protection of the Environment and the Marine Turtle in Southern Baja), biologist Elizabeth Gonzales led a group on patrol for new eggs, which can be moved only within 24 hours of being laid to avoid damaging fetuses as they form inside their shells.

Miles from Cabo's restaurants and bars, the sky above glittered with stars. The ground glittered, too, as our footsteps scattered phosphorescent plankton that had washed ashore. Within an hour Gonzales spotted tracks. She poked around with a stick until she detected a hollow patch beneath the ground. After recording the date and time on a chart, she began digging with her hands. Minutes later she pulled out handfuls of eggs, each as white and round as a golf ball. In all, there were 163, all from one turtle.

As Gonzales carried the eggs

back to the nursery in a plastic bag, we resumed patrolling the desolate beach. Ghostly sand crabs darted in the beam of our lights, and shooting stars tumbled above the dark ocean. Given our anticipation, it was easy to mistake the slick mound of a dead sea lion for a turtle.

We gave the departed beast wide berth and returned to camp, where another batch of babies had hatched. Each hatchling emerged from the ground dazed and exhausted by its effort, but by the time the last one had been set inside a cooler lined with wet sand, all had revived, and the box was full of tiny flippers paddling instinctively in search of the sea. The night yielded another nest, but no sightings of adult turtles. By 3 in the morning everyone had returned to camp, but sleep was elusive as beetles, leaf bugs, stick bugs and moths as big as our hands visited.

Dawn illuminated a blue-gray ocean, giving everyone a chance to examine their bug bites. We learned that another nest had hatched and walked the now-familiar path to the nursery. The newborns were collect-

ed, and there was just time for a hurried breakfast of cereal before a bus of local schoolchildren arrived as part of ASUPMATOMA's educational program on the conservation of these endangered animals. In the wild, more than 90 percent of hatchlings are devoured by crabs, birds and other predators before they make it to the ocean. And poachers target both eggs and hatchlings, selling them for human consumption in the local markets. Of those that survive, it's estimated that only 1 in 1,000 reaches adulthood, with females returning to the same beach where they hatched to lay their eggs.

Each child chose a baby turtle from the cooler, and Gonzales led the group to the shore, where the children assembled behind a line in the sand and set their turtles down. In the morning light, it was possible to see the efforts of the little creatures as they struggled to the ocean. Some moved forward furiously; others stayed still for a minute or two before moving ahead in a zigzag fashion, stopping occasionally as if to get their bearings. We kept vigil over the stragglers, watching until the last one was swept into the waves of the Pacific.

ASUPMATOMA offers visits and programs July 15 through March 31 at Rancho Punta San Cristobal. For more information, go to <http://savetheseaturtles.org>.