

# Sea Turtle Sanctuaries: Building a Culture of Conservation in Mexico

In communities suspicious of environmental stewardship, international volunteers and dedicated local conservationists work to shift attitudes and save turtles.

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: Photo: Jordan Kraft

## Sea Turtle Sanctuaries: Building a Culture of Conservation in Mexico

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By Forest Ray

**In communities suspicious of environmental stewardship, international volunteers and dedicated**

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By moonlight, Damaris Marin-Smith and a dozen others are prowling Playa Blanca, in search of sea turtle eggs. The 15-kilometre stretch of beach just south of Zihuatanejo, Mexico, is a favourite nesting ground for Olive Ridley, leatherback and green turtles—all of which have dwindling populations—but it's not the safest.

Poachers and predators also roam these same shores. Most nights involve finding the remains of at least one nest that has fallen prey to opportunistic cats and dogs. That's why Marin-Smith's mission is to locate eggs and transplant them to a nursery, where they will be protected until they hatch and are ready to enter the sea. Each year, roughly 100,000 baby sea turtles of various species are released from Ayotlcalli, representing an average of 1,000 nests.

Life is busy and sleepless for the volunteers at the Ayotlcalli Sea Turtle Sanctuary. While protecting the sea turtle eggs is a conservation priority, Mexican conservationists often struggle to find sufficient local volunteers. With only eight local volunteers, Ayotlcalli relies heavily the 30 to 40 foreigners who lend their time each year.

"In Mexico," says Marin-Smith, founder of Ayotlcalli, "efforts that benefit the communal good are typically seen as belonging to the government. Being told to take personal responsibility for things like keeping beaches clean or protecting certain animals is often viewed as paternalistic and intrusive."

This view, combined with an extreme wealth gap that leaves many Mexicans in poverty, has resulted in volunteering in conservation being viewed with suspicion. It's a problem that is not only harmful for the environment—but potentially for the economic livelihood of the local population, as well.

## Fundamental to the ecosystem and the economy

The two pillars of Guerrero's economy are fishing and tourism—and sea turtles figure into both of them.

Destinations like Acapulco, Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa draw hordes of sun lovers to their sandy shores. By laying eggs on the beaches, sea turtles play a vital role in their maintenance. The eggs contain needed nutrients, providing sustenance for grasses that help stabilize the sand, prevent erosion and keep it from being reclaimed by the pounding waves. The turtles also keep waters swimmer-friendly by eating up to 73 per cent of their considerable body weight in jellyfish every day.

***"Without the turtles here, there would be less reason for tourists to come and less work."***

of the turtles' grazing will become increasingly important. At the very least, the loss of sea turtles would be felt acutely.

Juan Carlos Rosas Cruz, who runs the Ecotdefender sea turtle sanctuary some 40km north of Ayotlcalli, explains this to a group of primary school children during an outing to a local mangrove: "All of your parents are either fishermen or work in tourism," he says. "Tourists come to places like ours for their natural beauty. Without the turtles here, there would be less reason for tourists to come and less work for your families. Without turtles, there would be fewer fish for your parents to catch and sell."

Rosas Cruz later admitted that he didn't like having to argue for the survival of a species in those terms, but "that's what matters most to people here; having a steady source of income. So that's what you have to address."

Income also remains a key factor in addressing the issue. Poorer Mexicans, who constitute the bulk of the population, tend to regard nature as a personal resource, whether for fuel, building materials or, most importantly, food. For many who report living on around \$7.50 per day (the national average is roughly \$17), this is hardly surprising.

It's also part of the reason that individual poaching remains problematic. Although harvesting sea turtle eggs is illegal in Mexico (except for a small number of licenses given to certain indigenous groups), some locals believe that the eggs have health benefits as well as more esoteric powers such as curing hangovers or acting as potent aphrodisiacs.

## Shifting local attitudes: the role of international volunteers

For Marin-Smith, that's why community engagement is the key to sustainable conservation efforts. To help foster a generation of conservation-minded citizens, she organizes school outings, where volunteers teach children about the role that sea turtles play in sustaining healthy coastal communities.

She sees the foreign volunteers, who typically come from places where environmental conservation is more highly prioritized, as key players in this effort. Marin-Smith hopes that the combination of foreigners and long-term local volunteers, who are themselves community members, will deliver a powerful and lasting example for others to follow.

The locals who do volunteer at Ayotlcalli display a passion for the project. Felipe de Jesús Campos

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community members perceive his work. “I feel proud when people stop by and tell us that what we’re doing is important. It wasn’t like that before,” he says.

In at least one case, Marin-Smith’s strategy of engaging local volunteers, and teaching children to conserve rather than consume sea turtles, appeared to be working. As the father of one family explained, he and his wife grew up eating turtle eggs as a matter of tradition; it was simply part of the menu. “My kids don’t eat them,” he said, “because they say that they don’t like the meat and in school, they are taught that they shouldn’t.”

It’s a small but vital victory. Nonetheless, fostering a culture of conservation in Mexico and attracting local volunteers promises to be a long road, requiring both patience and persistence. For now, and likely for some time to come, travellers interested in volunteering at sea turtle sanctuaries will play an important role in maintaining and developing conservation efforts.

“Teaching people to respect and conserve sea turtles will have knock-on effects,” says Marin-Smith. “If people learn to conserve one resource, they’ll grow more likely to conserve others, as well.”

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