

# Species Extinction

## Turtles

*Interview with Tim Rusmiser  
Volunteer, Turtle Rescue Center,  
Montezuma Beach, Costa Rica*

### **Facts:**

--“We’ve had a massive year. 400 nests. 35-38,000 hatchling releases.

-- one night last Oct we had 16 turtles nesting on this little beach. Nests ranged from a low of 49 to a high of 150 eggs. In one nite we had a hatch of 700 eggs.

--the baulas are down to 26,000 nesting females. For every mating pair you need 20k eggs.”

--**Hatch out:** I’ve seen 600 nests hatch out.

--Hatch-out: “When the nest is approaching its due date, you can tell. The sand in the center starts to sink, forming a little crater. The movement of the hatchlings inside the eggs loosens the sand around them. When we see this, we dig up and loosen the sand in the column above the eggs, to soften it up so it isn’t compacted.”

--Hatch out: “We have our first two green turtle nests, ever. That one there is ready to go. If you could stay around another 48 hours you could carry a hatchling down to the surf and release it. Have to wear the blue, plastic surgical gloves. A couple of the lora (ridley) nests are ready to go any time. we even had one baula (leatherback) nest this season.

--hatch out: “Less than 10% hatch in middle of the day. When that happens, we gather them into a bucket, taking and recording measurements of the first ten, using calipers to measure length and width, noting any deformities. We’re seeing more deformities this season, but we think it’s just because the numbers are bigger. In some cases, the fore-flippers are as small as the hind flippers. They’re only handled for those ten minutes it takes to put em in the bucket and carry ‘em down to the surf. We try to minimize our “footprint” that way. These are wild turtles. So, we stand guard as they wriggle down the sand to the surf, keeping any predators away: gulls, raccoons, dogs, herons . . . and people. There’s four locals here who walk the beach every dawn, looking for nests, to poach the eggs. There’s still a thriving black market. They’ll get a dollar per egg for baulas. That can be as much as \$300 a day. That’s real money. At first, we only saved about 3% of the nests. This season we’ll save about 90%.”

--**Nesting Season:** 8 mos nesting season on its last legs Vivero been manned round the clock since last July.

--Nesting/Peak: Oct/Nov. Then it was like non-stop action. I’d be putting hatchlings in a bucket when someone would run up from the beach, shouting that they’d found another nest. So we’d

run there, dig up the eggs, bring 'em here, rebury them, sweep the tracks and any signs of the nest so the poachers wouldn't know, then carry these hatchling down to the surf, release them, then run down the beach to where a nesting turtle had just hauled out, and stand guard till she and laid and lugged herself back into the sea, then dig up those eggs, carry 'em back to the hatchery, rebury 'em, log the date, time, number of eggs, and the workers on hand. It was like that for several weeks. No one knows why we're having so many nests this year. But we're not complaining."

--Nesting: Peak: "We wore ourselves out running back and forth, from the beach to the hatchery, from a hatching nest to a freshly buried one to one that was being dug.

--Life-cycle: first few years they spend in sargassum, too small to swim against currents, so they just go wherever it drifts them. Once big enough to swim against it strike out, and simply disappear. No one knows where they go for next 10-15 years. A mystery as deep as the sea. Around 20 they start showing up at the end of long migrations. Until they reach breeding age will migrate 2-8 times. They return to nesting beach to mate off shore. Females lay eggs 2 weeks later.

--Life cycle/males are loners, don't interact until they mate.

--**Business:** We do beach patrols, nest re-burials, hatchling releases, cover tracks and nests of adults, keep a visible presence round the clock.

--rebury nests since there is no vivero, and keep track of where they are. Once get enough volunteers, can start a vivero. Very low overhead. Just what we eat and drink, basically. Equipment is minimal and long lasting.

--Business; we run a low overhead, low impact operation. Project Huella, Project Footprint.

--he kneeling in sand of of thatche dvivero, facing me on log taking notes.

--"My definition of something is it isn't nothing."

--**The Dream/Sleeping:** "It's so beautiful sleeping on the sand in the hatchery. You hear the surf, watch the stars, til the moon comes up, look at the light over the waves, see the sunrise—fall asleep thinking of the hatchlings several feet below. Sometimes I even think I'm hearing them pecking at their shells with the hooked tip of their beaks.

--The Dream: "I've been doing this two years. Love the work. My dream is to establish my own vivero . . . on a beach where turtles nest that is not protected. Up in Nicauragua there are several. Beautiful beaches, with large nesting populations, completely unprotected."

--My reaction: "God, I thought, if the work is dangerous here, with a democratic govt, what protection could he expect from a renegade dictatorship like Nic's? Admired his dedication, his fearlessness, his refusal to be co-opted, to settle for half-measures. Extinction is not a half-measure. Something doesn't go a little extinct. It's an all or nothing proposition, and to prevent it you gotta be all-in."

--Thatched Hut: Slight, muscular, tattooed arms, head shaved on sides with crown on top. Blue eyes like sea in sunshine.

--**Problem/ Lights:** "The lights from that new resort up there were a real problem at first, cuz it confuses the hatchlings, who locate the sea by the light of the stars and moon. We went up and

talked to the owner, and kept going up to talk to him, until he finally agreed to kill the lights during the nesting season.. He wasn't happy about it, cuz it was his main way of advertising the resort. Then, last year, this American reality tv show, the Perfect Match decided this little I km beach was th perfect setting for the climax ot the show's season, so they set up these huge floodlights on that rocky point where you watch the sunset, to film the winning couple on the beach. It really affect the hatchlings we released, who instead of heading for the sea, hung a ninety degree turn and went straight for the floodlights. We met with the production chief, but he wouldn't budge. So we had to hand carry those hatchlings into the surf. Fortunately, the crew was only here for a couple of weeks."

**--Problem/ Poaching:** "Unlike nesting beaches in Florida, where I used grew up, you cant mark the nests here with yellow tape and wooden stakes, 'cuz the poachers will get 'em.

--Problem/ Poaching: What do you think of the solution they're trying at Ostionale, letting poachers harvest first 1% of eggs." "Only making the situation worse. Insuring the supply is only increasing the demand amongst locals for turtle eggs. In San Jose you havbe twice the number of people seeling them as you did before. Not only that, but whereas before they only had enough to seel them during the season, now thanks to the steady supply, they're selling them out of season, which used to be against the law, but is not legal, with a simple piece of paper saying the eggs were harvested legally at Ostionale, which had created a black market in these forms. You cant have it both ways, on the one hand saving the turtle eggs and on the other getting in bed with the poachers. The only way to stop poaching is to shrink the demand, which was what was happening. You simply ban it, make it so hard to find eggs, that the demans eventually dries up for want of product. Putting more product on the blackmarket is only incentivizing the poachers, making them more dangerous, because now they're even more willing to kill and rape to get the eggs!"

--Problem/Poaching: "a well-meaning, but misguided move in my humble opinion. Now, the sands of a nesting beach may have been soaked with the blood of a dedicated volunteer because of it."

**--Problem/commercial fishing** fleet gathers in fecund channel off Nicoya peninsula, where currents attract fish. Wipe out everything with long line nets, gill nets. Local fisherman blockaded the fleet to draw attention to the slaughter. Shrimpers biggest culprits, bottom dragging nets. Fllet reduced from 17 to 9 boats. Comerical boats pull everything out of the sea. Becoming a dead sea, a commercial fishing sacrifice zone.

--Problem: deformity: back flipper develops elephant leg.

**--Problem: Plastic:** garbage patch 3x size of Texas between Midway atol and Japan. He sweeps beaches of plastic shopwed images on smart phone. Homeowners thanking him. 46 bags off playaocolito.works beach by grids. Hauls out reclclabes, rakes grid to separate platic out, bags it, then sigfts small beads through striner. Now has 25 volunteers.

--Problem: Plastic: Rdg: Plastic Sea, Paul Watson.

## **--Eco Activism:**

### **Paul Watson and Jairo Mora Sandoval**

/ **Sea Shepherd** (Paul Watson) here this year in Puntarenas, doing a little investigative reporting into illegal shark-finning operation to sate the demand of Asian black market, uncovered ring, and put out of business.

--Sea shepherd named its most recent ship after Jairo Mora, donated \$30,000 of own money as reward for murderers;

--Sea Shepherd: funding the continuation of Jairo's vivero to save leatherback on Puerto Limon beaches;

--Sea Shepherd; Japanese bribed CR govt to issue arrest warrant for maritime violation that was ten years old. CR govt did. German govt arrested him, Japanese pressured to have him extradited to Japan. World outrage so intense, German rescinded warrant, all charges subsequently dropped, Paul Watson came out of hiding. Now waging 20 campaigns around the world's oceans: against illegal whaling, sharkfinning, long lining, gill netting. A watch dog on the open seas.

--Sea shepherd scared illegal long lining boat away, pulled in its nets for 10 hours, burned on deck.

### **Poaching, Activism, & Jairo Mora Sandoval: Murder and Trial**

--Subject Response: Looked around. So vulnerable. No security guard. No surveillance cameras, no fence with no lock. Just a low driftwood barrier that any dog could breach.

--Thought of the murder of Jairo Mora Sandoval on the other coast, Puerto Limon, as I looked around. All it'd take is for a couple of thugs with machetes or uzis to surprise in the middle of the night, while the volunteer is sleeping on the sand in the hatchery. Wondered if he slept with a machete under his head, or buried in the sand near his make-shift pillow.

--Poaching: "It's a much more clandestine operation here, a constant game between us and them, but it's a very serious one. When you start taking money out of a dude's pockets and meat off his table (especially if it's turtle meat) you're messin' with his livelihood, his family, even his manhood. But if we don't, these species won't make it through the next generation.

--The poachers would get such a high percentage of the nests, the breeding population wouldn't be sustainable. As it is, for every ten-thousand hatchlings we release, only one will live to return and lay eggs.

--So, it's a hard line in the sand between us and them. As you can imagine, we're not too popular with the poachers. But this side is much more peaceful than the Caribbean. People here don't carry guns. This whole area has a tradition of peacefulness. It draws a certain kind of person.

-----There's a real strong sense of community. A kind of zen-like vibe.

--Limon, where Jairo was murdered and the four female volunteers were raped is an outlaw culture. It run by the Columbian drug lords. There is no law. Everyone totes guns. The police are in bed with the drug traffickers and the poachers, who work the black-market trade in turtle eggs and drugs.

--But if nothing else, Jairo's murder flushed these thugs and the whole corrupt culture into the open, for the whole country, fuck the whole world to see. And so now people see 'em . . . for

what they are. Much harder to operate in that kind of light, public scrutiny. So even though those who committed the murder and the rapes were acquitted, the worm may already have turned . . . and the days of operating in the dark, out of the public eye, may already be a victim of their own crimes.

--Cant see how all the negative world publicity will be any good for all the legitimate businesses there, the hotels, restaurants tour guides, snorkeling tours yada yada yada . . . for the word is out that the place isn't for tourists safe after dark . . . for beach campers, beach strollers, sunset watchers.

--Solution? What it may take is for these legitimate, law abiding locals to pressure the others out of business. Nothing altruistic. Pure self-interest. Money. Business. A living. They'll either do that and things will change for the better, and for the better of the turtles . . . or they wont, and thing wont change. And the turtles will disappear . . . forever!

--Right now, folks in my line of work are very scared. The acquittal has really made them nervous. For many it was the last straw. The govt was their only hope for restoring order, cleaning up the corruption, locking the thugs away, shutting down their black-market trade, and giving Jairo and his family a little justice. Instead, it will do just the opposite.

--Tell the poachers it's okay to murder and rape turtle workers. We'll look the other way, and if you're caught we have your back, we'll find some loop-hole, some technicality in the long long winding road of jurisprudence to get you off. Two years and a hundred briefs present a lot of opportunities to trip over some technicality. That's the message the judges just sent.

--So, question is: if the police wont protect us, and the legal system wont protect us, do we need to start protecting ourselves—if these are the rules of the game. It's so hypocritical: they issue an arrest warrant for Paul Watson of Sea Shepherd for violating maritime law, but turn a blind eye to the murder and rape of environmentalists, while claiming to be the world's champion of environmental conservation.

--So, that's the point we've reached. Having exhausted every legal recourse, been abandoned by the police and legal system, we find ourselves on our own. And that is a very lonely feeling out here. It's why I have my little four-legged alarm clock there," he said, talking to his little ankle biter. She lets me know if a crab so much as enters the premises. Lulled self into a false sense of security.

--These are peaceful folk, who find the very idea of owning, carrying, handling a gun revolting. Who are creeped out by them . . . a prejudice that makes them even more vulnerable. It's now at the point where we need our own security force, apparatus . . . need to start looking for a new kind of volunteer, to complement the hatchery workers, whose background is in security, in its every form. I refuse to own a gun, but . . . that doesn't mean I don't have ways of protecting myself. Pulled machete out of back of trousers.

--Problem/ Poaching: "Only flaw there is what good is a machete if they come at you with uzis. Might slit the throat of a pit bull, but will hardly slice a high-powered bullet." I sleep better with it under the pillow.

-- After Jairo's murder there was an exodus of volunteers. Folks think the acquittal will only increase the exodus. They're short some 200 volunteers on those beaches. But I think it might have the opposite effect, is having the opposite effect. It's hardening people's attitude and resolve. What it's done is stripped away the wanna bes and the band-wagoners, to the hard corps last-standers. And what it is doing is bringing a new kind of volunteer, with a similar war-like spirit. Folks who want to be on the barricades in this war, now that it's taken this ugly turn, who simply refuse to give up, let the other side win. There's a militant grimness to their determination that is inspiring.

--What you're seeing is a volunteer cadre of Paul Watsons. In the wake of Jairo's murder, they're coming forward, stepping into the light from the shadows, crossing the line in the sand of apathetic spectatorship, stepping forward to be counted. These are volunteers with an attitude . . . they're quite willing to back up with actions. You can sense it in the air. The worm has turned.

--Something new is dawning. I think what's happening is that folks are starting to fight back . . . with some of the same militancy of the other side, and something else besides . . . that the other side does not have cornered, in the same way they've had the use of violence and intimidation and corruption cornered: technology. These folks may not have the uzis and pitbulls that pachers and black marketers do, may not have the political leverage, but they do have another secret weapon: technology.

--They have a leg up in the intel gathering game, as a counter-weapon. Even as we sit here in the sand speaking, things are happening . . . things the public has no knowledge of, the poachers have no knowledge of, the politicians have no knowledge of."

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