

WHOLESALE THEFT OF EGGS COULD LEAD TO SEA TURTLE EXTINCTION

BY E.M. FAY

In a world full of war, poverty, and daily examples of man's inhumanity to man, it may be difficult for us to focus on the suffering of other species. Human hardship is evident on so many fronts, be it starvation, disease, genocide, or "natural" disasters. One's heart goes out to fellow beings in extreme distress; and the relatively well-off among us often make efforts to alleviate what we can, whether by donations to charities or, in some cases, by direct action such as joining the Peace Corps and other worthwhile groups.

Misery is not limited to mankind, however. All living beings are subject to the whims of nature, and sadly, many are also vulnerable to the cruel or unthinking actions of people. If those of us who care about the welfare of wildlife take the trouble to inform ourselves, we can take action to save many innocent animal individuals from unnecessary anguish.

One such case which needs immediate attention is the taking of sea turtle eggs in Costa Rica, a crime against nature which threatens to cause the extinction of this species in the very near future.

Contrary to Costa Rica's long-held claim to be one of the forefathers of turtle conservation, horrifying photographs that have been widely distributed show the legal "harvesting" of turtle nesting sites in Ostional, which is on the Guanacaste Peninsula of Costa Rica. Guanacaste is one of the most important of the very few remaining sea turtle nesting beaches in the world. Natives in the photos are shown filling huge bags with thousands of turtle eggs as the mother turtles stand by helplessly. The eggs are taken away for sale, allegedly as a benefit to the local economy. Most end up in China or other overseas black markets where the price is ten times higher.

The cruelty is obvious, as the egg removal is done right in front of the mother turtles who have struggled to produce their progeny in the first place. Although sea turtles spend most of their lives in the ocean, they must come to land to lay their eggs. They arduously travel many miles from feeding grounds to reach their natal beach. When they come ashore, often numerous times, they make nests and deposit the eggs on the dry sand away



from waves. It is a strenuous task for the female turtle to pull her heavy body up high enough on the beach with only her front flippers, limbs which are adapted for swimming, not walking on dry land. She digs a pit in the sand, then lays her clutch of perhaps as many as 100 eggs and covers them carefully with sand. If left unmolested, she would then bury the pit in order to disguise the location against predators.

In spite of all this maternal labor and hardship, people who have been lying in wait grab up the eggs without thought. To put it in a human context, it is akin to someone invading a hospital nursery and snatching up all the babies. All mothers and society at large would surely feel grief over such a loss.

According to the Costa Rican National Parks website, egg collection is permitted for residents of just one community and is strictly controlled by the Costa Rican government. They say that because the "harvesting" is restricted to approximately 120 local

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families it has no effect on the total number of turtle hatchlings. The government claims this is part of a sustainable plan that increases the total number of hatchlings. They further claim that the locals prevent uncontrolled poaching of eggs from the refuge, at the same time improving their own economic situation.

Part of the justification for this activity from the website of the Ostional Wildlife Refuge: *"So many turtles come onto the beach in a short time span that most of the first nests are destroyed by later turtles. Therefore, in 1987, a project was initiated to allow local people the right to collect and sell a percentage of the eggs. This practice is designed to prevent poaching and to help the local community."*

<http://www.costarica-nationalparks.com/ostional-wildliferefuge.html>

While it's true that global warming, pollution, tourism, development, and the trapping of sea turtles in fishing nets have been decimating sea turtle populations for decades, it's not true that "harvesting" of eggs is harmless to the species. In fact, it could possibly be the most damaging attack on these gentle creatures, and poses a very real danger of species extinction.

Captain Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, stated: *"Costa Rica has the undeserved reputation of being an ecologically aware and concerned nation. Great public relations, but it is all a fabricated lie."*

He goes on to say, *"The fact remains that despite Costa Rica's claims to the contrary, the country is the most notorious shark-finning nation in Central and South America. The use of pesticides on banana and coffee plantations kills hundreds of thousands of birds*

annually. And as these pictures illustrate very dramatically, Costa Ricans loot the eggs from the sea turtles contributing greatly to the diminishment of these valuable and beautiful creatures.

"Those defending the exploitation of the eggs argue that these are poor people just trying to feed their families. However, the sea turtles here are poor mothers of a species trying desperately to survive. In a decade, when the turtles are gone, the 'poor' will no longer be able to plunder what is no longer there, and the world will be far poorer with the loss of the turtles.

"Poverty must not be an excuse or a justification for driving a species to extinction. What these people are doing is wrong. I am sure that the government of Costa Rica would not stand idly by and watch the poor walk into banks and take what they want. Robbing banks and robbing sea turtles of their eggs are both crimes, so why is poverty the justification for one crime but not the other? Although legal under Costa Rican law, rob-

bing of the turtles is a crime against nature and humanity, with far more significantly negative consequences than the robbing of a bank of some paper currency.

"We can't constantly point our fingers at global warming as the sole cause of diminishment of bio-diversity in the world's oceans. We humans are killing our oceans in many diverse ways and over fishing is the primary cause of diminishment of bio-diversity. The eggs these people are gathering will not be eaten by them. These eggs will be shipped to China to enhance China's 'food culture.' 'Food culture' is the new word coined to justify the consumption of endangered species and implies that any criticism is akin to racism. Thus, any accusation of dolphin, whale, or tuna consumption in Japan, or shark fin or turtle egg consumption in China, is now conveniently dismissed as racist and implies non-tolerance of their 'food culture.'"

Visit the Sea Shepherd website
<http://www.seashepherd>

Positive Action We Can Take :

Americans, or indeed anyone who cares about the sad fate of the sea turtles at the hands of Costa Ricans, should write to the Costa Rican Ambassador Muni Figueres, in Washington, DC.

Tell her that you strongly oppose Costa Rica's immoral sale of sea turtle eggs and will never again visit Costa Rica or buy Costa Rican products if they do not put a stop to this cruel trade.

Surely, tourism dollars are more important to Costa Rica than the sale of turtle eggs! We should lobby the embassy and consulates to make the theft of sea turtle eggs a crime with strict penalties and rigorous enforcement.

Address and phone numbers:

Embassy of Costa Rica in the U. S. 2114 S Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20008

Phone: 202-234-2945, 202-234-2946, 202-234-8653; Fax: 202-265-4795

E-mail: embassy@costarica-embassy.org; Muni Figueres, ambassador@costarica-embassy.org

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