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Blue Ocean Writings

Diary

Carl Safina's voyages around the world have brought him face-to-face with giant, car-sized Leatherback turtles, hundreds of thousands of nesting albatrosses, and pods of dolphins facing death from tuna fishing. Scroll below to read some of his diary entries:

Mazatlan to Manzanillo, by Carl Safina

Yesterday we flew a portion of Mexico's west coast, from Los Mochis to Mazatlán, spending about two and a half hours in the air, scanning a couple hundred miles of beach but finding not one Leatherback Turtle nest.

This morning the Pacific Ocean appears tranquilo and we're in the air by mid-morning. Laura again keeps eyes fixed and fixated on the shore below, never faltering. I am again ready to key the position of any Leatherback nest into our Global Positioning System unit, and I'm hoping for a little more Leatherback Turtle action than yesterday's big zero.

Dark dolphins slide through murky water. A mile offshore, large schools of small fish look like dark breeze patches on an otherwise slick surface. Six big commercial fishing boats are streaming along.

To our left is a large lagoon, loaded with wintering migrant shorebirds. Sandy, who knows it well, says, "That place is so alive you can't believe it."

Soon Laura spots an Olive Ridley Turtle nest, then—a Leatherback track.

A truck is driving down the beach, its open bed crammed with cows. Men with horses and dogs are also moving along the beach highway. The land backing the beach is an odd mixture of coconuts and cows, each producing products called "milk" and "meat." The coastal landscape here is a series of fields and orchards on a scrubby plain that runs perhaps six miles inland to the Sierra Madre, the mother mountains.

When a school of dolphins appears half a mile offshore, Sandy drifts toward them almost involuntarily, then says, "Whoops," and heads back along shore. Laura, commenting in imperfect English on the glare, says, "It is a very shiny day." The ocean is flecked with a million diamonds, inlaid with living creatures.

A very light breeze comes up, turning the ocean into a vast blue jigsaw puzzle of polygon-patterned breeze licks and slicks. Two dozen small fishing boats called pangas, heavily attended by frigatebirds, are strung out over two miles. I want to ask Laura what they might be doing, but she hasn't taken her eyes off the sand. When we've been in the air for two hours, the Sierra Madre brings her jagged, sawtooth presence down along the coastline. The beach is backed no longer by cultivated, cow-pastured plains, but by slopes and jungle-tangled mountains that run to meet sandy ribbons of shore. Sandy says, "I think we have serious beauty going on today." This lasts for about twenty miles, then we find ourselves flying a long stretch of sand running many miles between the jungled headlands now to our north and another headland to the distant south.

Most of the time, we fly wordless for long stretches over miles of shoreline, Sandy keeping the plane along the surf, Laura scanning, I looking, looking; the engine roaring. When the ocean explodes about a mile away, Sandy heads straight for it without a word. Laura says simply, "There are two more right here." Short of the detonating leviathan, a pair of Humpback Whales are swimming in exquisite synchrony. They both lift flukes and dive in perfect pas de deux. We skip a beach full of people as hopeless for turtle nesting. But a mere mile away runs a deserted stretch of sand, and here at 11:55 Laura calls a Leatherback nest—our day's first. Just offshore ten large boats include shrimp draggers and seiners, part of the traffic around Puerto Vallarta. Sandy says, "It gets really rich here." And soon we're whizzing past castles and palaces perched upon slopes overlooking the sea. Bulldozers are carving roads and room for new castles into the Madre's shoulders.

Laura calls two Leatherback nests in five minutes which we dutifully log. There are more fishing boats offshore. And suddenly something disturbing: Laura calls two dead Olive Ridley Turtles. A couple of minutes later Laura calls a Leatherback nest. Then two more dead Ridges. So in the last mile, four dead turtles. The next ten minutes bring seven Leatherback nests followed by a hatchery. While turtles are killed by either boats offshore or poachers, biologists deliver their eggs to productive custody. Laura says, "Good! Many hatchlings." Vultures are devouring another dead turtle on the beach, but Laura calls nine Leatherback nests within the next few miles. When the beach ends at a headland we fly around it and pick up again on the next ribbon of sand, till the next headland. So it goes. In places purple-pink Amapa flowers dominate the slopes like wild cherry blossoms, breathtaking. Sandy makes no attempt to hide her admiration.