

Explore

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:

Leatherbacks and Lords

Today, we'll be flying the over densest Leatherback nesting areas in the country, including the famed 11-mile beach called Mexiquillo. Fifteen years ago, Mexiquillo had about 5,000 nests. Last year, only three or four females laid just 19 nests. Yet Laura's on-ground workers have reported greatly increased nesting this year. But there's been trouble. Two months ago, armed thieves took a turtle researcher's ATV. Two marines sent to retrieve it were shot, one fatally. This week, a policeman was killed in a gunfight on the road. Laura says local drug-runners are battling drug-traffickers from outside. The policeman's life was wasted "to send a message about who's now in control." Pulse as notepaper.

Tension is high, the biologists frightened. Laura says, "They are there, feeling alone, scared, very worried. No one knows of their work to save the world's sea turtles, though they are heroes." Three years ago Laura herself was robbed at gunpoint, losing her vehicle, computer, money, a trailered ATV and research equipment. She says, "The trouble isn't about turtles, but the researchers' ATVs make them targets for armed robberies." Sandy adds, "A lot of bad things are done because of drugs."

Mexiquillo is supposed to be an "index" beach, where workers on the ground get an accurate count of all nests for the season. Comparing our one-day air count with the accurate all-season ground-count gives a correction factor that can be applied to all our aerial counts, to estimate total-season nest numbers for the rest of the beaches we survey. But the troubles raise a question about today's air count. Yet Laura will not be deterred by drug wars. She explains, "We will do the count, and because I expect high nest density, we will turn and count a second time. Then we will pass again." I say, "So this place where the armed people are, who killed the marine and the policeman—" Laura interrupts, "And they have very good guns, that shoot long-distance." "Right; that's where the Leatherbacks are most concentrated, so we will be flying in circles, low, over that beach...." "Yes," she anticipates, "I was thinking about that. But I think everything will be OK."

Wheels up at 10:00. Morning sun is shimmering the water into a thousand mirrors. The first beach has 25 Leatherback nests along an eight-mile stretch. In the next ten minutes, evidence of 15 nests. By 11:00 our astonishing total is 113 nests of the rare behemoth turtle. Mountains again meet the coast, with spectacular 300-foot cliffs of sheer granite diving to black beaches piled with rocky rubble. The coast

becomes a series of proud headlands and plunging cliffs and scalloped beaches. Sandy gasps, "Preciosa." By 11:30 we've logged 138 Leatherback nests. We round a series of high jagged headlands, and then the coast relaxes again—and the famed, infamous Mexiquillo emerges into view. We've surveyed Mexico's coast thus far at an altitude of 200 feet, but Sandy decides to overfly Mexiquillo first at 1,000 feet. She asks, "Who lives in this big mansion on top of the hill?"

"Nobody," replies Laura, "The owner was killed a year ago."

"Car accident?" I ask hopefully.

"No. With guns. In the street."

Sandy says, "I don't see anyone or any trucks. Lets go back and do it." Sandy, in steep circling descent, is pulling gravity. Two small Black Turtles are bobbing in the near-shore sea. And suddenly I see the slick gleam of a huge Leatherback at rest in the swell. Laura spots a Ridley. Lots of turtles swimming around here!

With plenty of advance notice to friend or foe, we drop along the beach, commencing our count. Here there are too many nests to call. Laura is silent, her finger constantly working the click-counter. In the water beyond the surf, past the marl where the sand is stirred into billows, I'm seeing adult Leatherbacks, about one a minute. I'm also seeing stingrays in the shallows, and Roosterfish, and a small shark. One Roosterfish streaks up to take something in a fast blast of foam, and I imagine life just ended for one cookie-sized Leatherback hatchling.

Drug lords are scarcer than Leatherbacks here, and remain out of sight. But we do see the turtle workers, waving energetically on the beach outside their camp. They have written "S. O. S" in the sand. I think they're less than half-joking. Sandy takes us straight overhead, low, wagging her wings at them. Laura breaks her silence only to say excitedly over our headphones, "Many nidos." She's counted 193. In the last few minutes I've seen twice as many Leatherbacks in the water as were using this beach all last year. We run the beach again and get 186—ten times as many nests as last year. Praise and exaltation! The world yet lives! Planet Earth, take a deep breath, take a bow. The Leatherback, beleaguered, is not yet vanquished.

This is a good year. But two hundred nests, or even 400, is not the 5,000 of a few years ago. It's a good year, the worst good year in history. Nonetheless, there's more fight yet left in the Leatherback's Pacific population. More viability than it seemed last year. More to work with. A little more time to train fishermen, educate poachers, buy nesting beaches. A little more time to save the Leatherback.