

## 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:

#### Stranded Angels

Sandy had mentioned that despite her hours aloft she'd never watched a turtle laying eggs. And so we are on the ground. Our destination is the beach camp at Barra de la Cruz. Laura comments, "I like Mexiquillo very much, but it is dangerous." It's a warm soft night and the waves sound delicious. There's a faint trill of insects and the smell of vegetation and the sea. It's a wide flat beach of powdery sand and gleaming breakers. Laura's colleague and former student, Letey Gamez, greets us warmly. While Sandy and I get settled Letey takes Laura on a quick all-terrain-vehicle reconnaissance of the beach. A short while later Laura returns with news: there's a Leatherback down the beach right now. We hop onto the ATV with Laura driving, and streak along in the night wind, running the harder wet-packed sand near the hissing waves, following the shore's contours about a mile. This beach impresses as a very remote place. I see no human-made light, not up or down the beach, nor back into the shadowed hills.

The turtle is up on dry sand, already well into her body pit. I've seen these turtles on beaches before, and Sandy is suitably awed, repeating, "I don't believe it. I don't believe it." Sandy looks and looks at the monster in our midst, then says, "I didn't expect her to appear so... real." I say, "She's a little surreal."

When she manages to collect herself a bit, Sandy says, "She looks like a Stegosaurus—or some kind of—saurus." Inspecting more closely, she observes, "I didn't understand that the ridges on her back were so pronounced."

Not far away, another gleaming female is emerging from the ocean. Sandy says, "Think of how astonishing it must be. For all the time it has been growing, it has wandered a world in weightless motion. And yet after years in this deep, moving world, it drives itself to shore. And in an instant this weightless being suddenly weighs half a ton. What in the world is she experiencing?" The great Leatherback before us has finished clearing the site and digging the "body pit" and is settled down into the more humid sand, into which she is now drilling a perfectly cylindrical egg chamber. She does this with her rear flippers, her work perfect and unseen, the work of a blind watchmaker.

She seems on autopilot, as though channeling directions from a higher source. We seem to be witnessing sheer instinct. Something in her is directing bone and muscle movement and her exacting

fine-motor manipulations. And thus she digs the precious chamber she was born to dig, her rear flippers alternating, her whole posterior shifting for each perfect scoop. And in equal measures absurd and yet appropriate, I suddenly hear Aretha Franklin in my head, singing,  
“Rock steady. Rock steady, baby.  
Let’s call this song exactly what it is (what it is, what it is).  
Just move your hips with a feeling from side to side.  
Dig yourself a body pit and go for a ride—  
While you’re moving rock steady. Rock steady, baby...”

Here on a wild night beach with a booming surf for a rhythm section and a nesting dinosaur from the deepest reaches of the planet, the greatest mystery is how we’ve gotten here all together.

Laura says that if we don’t take her eggs to the hatchery, poachers will get them. I ask, “What poachers?” As far as I can tell, there is no one else here. Laura laughs. “They are here. Already, they know she is here digging. Just before I went to get you, a man was here with a bucket for her eggs. He said to us, ‘OK, you found her first.’ There is a village, not far. And a path, there.” She gestures to a cleft in the nearby dune that leads into the vegetative shadows. “They are like ghosts. You don’t see them. But they are here. Always here.”

And so one of the turtle crew produces a large plastic bag and collects her eggs as they fall, for deliverance to the hatchery. The turtle has no idea. When she has finished her task she covers her empty egg chamber, suspecting nothing. It’s just another of the acts of faith that link the chain of her long life. And in her next act of faith she chugs heavily down the beach, into the waves. The moon-pulled surf is running hard and high. The first wave that hits her is big enough to float her off her belly, and she begins swimming. And in the next wave she is gone. Laura drops Sandy and me off at 3:18 a.m. so we can spread our blankets on the beach and dream of giant turtles, while Laura herself zooms back into the night. She knows there will be more eggs, more Leatherbacks to save.