

## 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:

#### Notes From New Guinea

Warmon, New Guinea. We haven't walked 200 yards before Peter Dutton notices the dark outline of a turtle in the surf. Lurch by lurch, the shadow climbs. Shadow into shadows, she vanishes against the black-velvet curtain of primeval forest. Rather than follow, we sit quietly, the natives smoking and chewing betel nut, speaking their murmuring tongue, our voices joining the rhythmic shuss of surf. We let her begin digging in peace, before we get to work. This is some of the first scientific census work that's been done here. In just the last year it's become apparent that Warmon is a sizable Leatherback rookery that has been overlooked until now.

All my life I've imagined New Guinea as among the wildest and most exotic of remaining wild lands. Our eight-hour boat journey here did nothing to dispel that fantasy. For a hundred and fifty miles from the port of Sorong, we beheld a shore devoid of a single visible dwelling or even one line of smoke. What we saw was towering primordial forest and ridge upon ridge of layered mountains backed into churning clouds. Within plain sight of the beach, frothing frenzies of big Yellowfin Tuna were crashing chrome-plated flyingfish beneath mobs of screaming terns and frigatebirds. We saw not a single fishing vessel. The only sign of human presence was a rare figure walking the beach, as people here have for more than 50,000 years.

We cruised a few more hours until we approached this stretch of beach called Warmon. The Pacific's passivity let the captain simply back the boat practically against the beach, where it shrugged off a light surge as, carrying our bags and gear high, we stepped overboard and waded ashore amidst tracks of Leatherbacks.

The massive and mountainous Bird's Head Peninsula comprises New Guinea's northwestern corner. We're on its north coast, just an eyelash below the equator. Taking in the vast forest, the uninterrupted sweep of sea and long, lonely beaches, this coast makes a deep impression. Though people have been here 50,000 years, sea turtles have likely been leaving tracks in these sands a thousand times longer.

We'd arrived an hour before sunset, and made camp high on the steep beach, pitching tents upon fine gray sand. The shoreline bears not one artificial light. The view up and down the coast reveals only

unbroken blackness. A place so wild has, above all, potential. In a place without roads, who can say where the road will lead? All options good and bad remain open. The people may or may not live the lives they were born to. The forest may or may not stand. Turtles might maintain or vanish. Technology, opportunity, education, and complication could come, or perhaps keep their distance another few thousand years, who knows. Strife could engulf. Peace may abide.

We would like to think we're a little piece of the peace we hope will follow. This is the last significant surviving Leatherback Turtle nesting ground in the western Pacific. Conservation here is critical. But the local people have made it known: they too have needs.

The people have no land vehicles, no carts, no beasts of burden, no wheels, no shoes. People exposed to the wider world (and our electronics, books, cameras, tents, malaria pills and bug repellants certainly count as exposure) want more of what that world offers. Getting it requires money. Money originates as human energy applied to converting natural resources into products.

Exploiters seldom hesitate to pay cash commissions for exploitation. Even if the people realize the jobs will last just a few years until the resources are gone, the present usually seems more compelling than the future.

Conservation will have to compete financially. Conservation's disadvantage is that its funds are chronically tight. Conservation's main untapped advantage—and it's a big one—is that it is more capable of caring about people and their natural endowment than cut-and-run loggers or mining companies who leave places ruined and people displaced from their own identities, dislocated from their futures. Up to now, most conservation groups' money has gone to staffing. Relatively little pays local people for conservation and protection. That could be overcome by redirecting funds, and by showing more investment-encouraging successes for both wildlife and people.

Many conservationists—myself included—don't like the idea of paying people to simply not destroy trees or wildlife. But when the competition is waving cash to cut the forests, ideology had better adapt, fast. In the U.S., conservation is done through laws and regulations backed by enforcement and the courts. Very little of the planet works that way. In most places what counts are custom, community, and material aspirations of local people. Some conservationists who've seen what does and doesn't work—including several I'm traveling with—now believe that long-term conservation plans will have to include a package of benefits for villagers, with funding endowed by the biggest conservation groups and institutions like the World Bank.

Some of the local people here have already felt insulted that the world would look here and see the needs of turtles more than of people themselves. Fewer than half have been to school; they want education for their children. They want access to markets. They want what other people have. They live in a beautiful place with more leisure and more priceless waterfront than they could ever use. But there have always been unquenched desires in paradise. The human heart will cast itself out of Eden every time, because it has needs heaven never addresses.

To make conservation work for turtles, we'll have to work with the people to devise a broader, long-term vision to make conservation valuable to the whole community, responsive to its needs.

The community's needs are many, starting with improved educational opportunity and health care. Nearly all the locals have malaria that comes and goes. It can kill children and the elderly. But good health care requires money and an enlightened policy that sees health services not just for treating sickness but as part of a package for human betterment that could include education, conservation of nature and natural resources, the ability to plan families, freedom of expression, self-determination, and basic dignity. Schools, healthcare, and employing people for wildlife work; that's feasible as part of an overall regional conservation plan that seeks to secure nature while also benefiting the people materially. This is conservation's next frontier.

And so the challenge: amid inevitable change, try to do some good, attempt to discern a better balance. And be prepared to pay.