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NEWS

Costa Rica turtle town welcomes nesting season

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A small coastal village is working to build an economic future around endangered sea turtle conservation.



Digging In: Residents of the Caribbean coastal town of Gandoca prepare a hatchery for eggs from nesting leatherback turtles. The volunteers help protect threatened sea turtles to stimulate local ecotourism. *Courtesy of Asomipag.*

A little after 9 p.m., Pablo Rodríguez trudged his way through the deep sand of a sprawling beach. Thick clouds blocked the faintest hint of starlight from reaching the ground and the thunder of rolling waves shrank the sound of his voice to a whisper. A Swedish couple followed closely behind the 23-year-old guide. The couple said they traveled halfway around the world to

this specific beach for one reason – the chance to see a giant turtle bury its eggs in the warm Costa Rican sand.

Every year from February to July, hundreds of leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the world's largest species of sea turtle, journey to the beach to bear their young in the same place they were born. Known as the Gandoca Refuge, the 18-kilometer stretch of pristine waterfront nestles on the Caribbean coast in Limón province, near the Panamanian border.

“Somehow they remember the beach where they were born and will not lay their eggs anywhere else in the world,” Rodríguez said.

Considered to be the most critically endangered of the seven species of sea turtles found in Costa Rica, leatherbacks spend their lives roaming the tropical and subtropical seas of the world. They range the length of the American continents, from Alaska to Chile, however they will only nest along tropical coasts. The Gandoca Refuge has the highest nesting density of leatherback turtles reported in Costa Rica, with an average of five turtles arriving per night to bury eggs in the sand.

On this particular evening, Rodríguez illuminated a path for his tourist duo with the faint red light from his headlamp. The small group approached a reported turtle sighting tentatively. Two local women and a man knelt in the sand around the shadowy silhouette of a large creature. After waiting several minutes, Rodríguez beckoned the Swedes forward to take a look for themselves. Three red beams illuminated a large sea turtle. Over a meter long and more than half a meter across, the leatherback female hunched over a gaping hole she had dug in the sand. She glared listlessly ahead, oblivious to the crowd of people surrounding her. One of the women emerged from the hole with a large, clear bag full of turtle eggs, resembling giant white pearls. Rodríguez explained that each turtle buries between 45 and 100 eggs in a nest. Next, the turtle will spend up to an hour covering up the hole to disguise it from predators.

Surprisingly, the massive creature didn't seem to notice the eggs it laid were almost immediately collected by a waiting volunteer. “The turtles enter a kind of a trance when they start to dig,” Rodríguez explained. “They don't notice us here and don't notice that we are collecting the eggs.”

He said the eggs are taken to a nearby hatchery to reduce the mortality rate from extraction and flooding. The hatcheries are monitored 24 hours a day, he said. Scientific measurements are taken to generate information to fuel conservation efforts.

“When we move the eggs, about 30 percent of them end up not making it to the water,” he said. “However, if we leave them alone, only about one in a hundred will make it back to the ocean.” Rodríguez attributed the high mortality rate of hatchlings in natural conditions to predation, hard compact soil, and human poachers. He said the eggs are sold on the black market because of the presumed belief they can be used as an aphrodisiac.

Rodríguez is one of many volunteers who patrol the beach every night from sunset to sunrise. They are mostly members of the Gandoca community. Despite not having university training in marine biology or wildlife conservation, men, women, and children of the small village have taken it upon themselves to help the leatherbacks survive the dangers that go hand in hand with

human encroachment and development. Poaching, fishing, habitat destruction, pollution and artificial light have greatly reduced the turtles' odds of survival throughout the tropics.

Rodríguez was born and raised in the tightly knit community of Gandoca. He said he gives his time free of charge to help ensure the annual return of the giant leatherback.

"The community is very attached to this project," he said. "For me this isn't about money. I work in the fields and study marine biology during the day and patrol at night."

Rodríguez's strong feelings of kinship towards the turtle and his ties to the community are mirrored in many of the inhabitants of the small village. Despite being located in one of Costa Rica's poorest areas, the canton of Talamanca, community members volunteer their time in order to promote a budding industry in sustainable tourism. In addition, the town has taken considerable efforts to preserve turtle habitat from development. The long stretch of beach adjacent to Gandoca is devoid of beachfront property and resorts.

"The people from here work together to protect our community, a place we all call home," said Sandra Medrano, a member of the Gandoca Development Association. Medrano moved to Gandoca with her husband to work in the banana fields in 1982. Over the past 30 years, she said the association and the community as a whole have worked together to transform the area into a truly unique and remarkable place in the heart of one of Costa Rica's most destitute areas.

"Since coming here I've seen the community get electricity, cellular phones, running water and a high school," she said. "We literally went door to door to raise support to make this a better place."

She emphasized the tranquil nature of the small town, a place void of locked doors and steel bars over windows. "Gandoca is a safe place, an important place," Medrano said. "We are often overlooked as a tourist destination because the region has a reputation as a dangerous place."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Gandoca is the emphasis its residents along with local, national and international wildlife groups place on developing a strong ecotourism industry.

Representatives from Costa Rica's Environment, Energy and Telecommunications Ministry (MINAET), the National System of Conservation Areas, and a large representation from the town gathered on Monday to recognize Gandoca as a leader in promoting sustainable ecotourism.

Jorge González, an environmental researcher for MINAET, said he feels the town has the potential to capitalize from its destination along one of the premier beaches for turtle watching in the country. He said in addition to it being a top location for turtle watching, Gandoca is one of the accesses to the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge. The area protects more than eight hectares of marine-coastal territory, including mangroves, coral reefs and rain forests.

Another interesting aspect of Gandoca is the role a group of women play in promoting environmental conservation. Consisting entirely of women, the group Asomipag formed in 2005 with the goal of discovering economic alternatives to sustain the area. Today the group is in charge of the project "Community Management of Sea Turtles in Gandoca, Limón."

Gladys Rojas, president of the women's association, said the town has made considerable efforts to promote environmental education and conservation among the community. She said the town is working to establish an environmental education program, focusing on sea turtle conservation to educate both students and adults. "It is a priority to make the society a participant in the conservation efforts," she said.

Town officials predict a total of \$46 million is needed to develop and sustain the industry to a point where it is self-sufficient. Rojas said Asomipag and the Gandoca Development Association are looking for sources of outside funding from investors in the United States, Europe and through national grants. However, she maintained that keeping the benefits of the industry in Gandoca is of the utmost importance. Many community members pointed out that past conservation efforts did not achieve widespread acceptance because the majority of economic benefits from tourism and conservation were kept by outside investors.

"Gandoca is one of the few areas where conservation work is done almost entirely by our own community," Rojas said. "We take great pride in this being a local industry."