



# Costa Rica Outdoors

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# In the Middle of the Night: Sea Turtles Renew Economy in Gandoca



BY PETE MAJERLE

Photos courtesy of ANAI

**T**he giant Leatherback turtle laboriously pulls herself out of the foaming midnight surf, dragging her 635-kilogram (1,400-pound) frame across the sand. Tenaciously and methodically she moves up the beach where she'll lay more than one hundred eggs, fill the hole, camouflage the area, and return to the sea.

Without the mother's care, the tiny hatchlings will emerge within three months and begin their improbable struggle to reach adulthood. For centuries, this ancient act has taken place in the tiny Costa Rican village of Gandoca, where a project is underway on the southern Caribbean coast to save endangered sea turtles and improve the local economy at the same time.

In Gandoca, faded clapboard houses sit on stilts to weather regular floods. The town consists of a few sagging houses spread along a dirt road, with a general store and a sometimes-open bar. If they're lucky enough to have a boat or some land, residents fish or work the land. Many others work hard for mere subsistence at the local banana plantations.

But change is in the air. Waterlogged homes are being reinforced with concrete. Hammer strikes draw the eye to an expanding tourist lodge. The local economy is changing because of the Leatherback turtle. Once prized for the price her eggs could fetch on the black market, the Leatherback is bringing former poachers out of the bushes and putting them in charge of caring for the Leatherback through a local conservation organization. The result is a newly thriving economy and increasing turtle population just north of the Panamanian border.

The Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is one of the world's most ancient and fascinating reptiles. They are creatures of extremes: They can dive more than 10,000 meters (33,000 feet) in less than a half hour, travel around 6,500 kilometers (4,000 miles) in search of food and are the only temperature-regulating reptiles in the world.

They grow more than 6,000 percent in 10 years on a diet of mainly jellyfish. Masters of long-term survival, the species has witnessed the world since the time of dinosaurs. Man, however, has placed them in critical danger of extinction.

"Since the early 1980s there has been a loss [in leatherback population of around 80 percent worldwide. We are working to reverse that," says Wagner Quirós, a passionate, energetic young man with an eye for nature and a desire to make a difference.

Quirós works for Asociación ANAI, the conservation group that organizes the small banana harvesting community of Gandoca, near Sixaola on the southern Caribbean coast. Quirós waves his hand around the simple wooden structures that house the scientists and volunteers. "This is where it all takes place," he said. "This is where change begins."

If the leatherback is to survive, change is needed. With the current worldwide rate of decline, these graceful sea creatures face

extinction within 20 years, according to some estimates. To fight this loss, ANAI began a model program of conservation, ecotourism and sustainable development to reverse this destructive trend.

Before 1986, when the program began, more than 95 percent of the eggs left by leatherbacks at Gandoca were lost to poachers. Although the eggs are protected, poachers found they could sell them on the black market for fetching prices.

To combat this, community leaders joined forces with interested local and international volunteers and scientists to keep poachers at bay, identify and track the turtles, and build hatcheries to save eggs in danger. Experienced local citizens serve as guides and patrol leaders, directly involving the community in the conservation process.

The success of the project has been raising eyebrows. Last year poachers stole less than four percent of the eggs. The same year, the number of leatherbacks arriving to nest increased by 5.7 percent. Turtles return to same the beach where they were hatched to lay their eggs after reaching sexual maturity some 10 to 15 years later.

Additionally, volunteers pay a small sum to live and eat with townfolk in homes and cabins, feeding the local economy. The increase in turtles is attracting more tourist dollars. Through this positive economic benefit, ANAI has received increased support from the community.

There's good reason to support the project. On the risky, volatile black market the turtle eggs could fetch anywhere between two cents and five dollars each. Taking care of the eggs, however, has proven much more lucrative. For example, if the economy were based on poaching Gandoca would have made about \$13,700 last year by selling all of the eggs on the black market. But with ecotourists coming and making Gandoca their base, the community made over \$67,000 last year – from tourism and conservation alone.

Now that the town is making money from the conservation project, "the turtles have become the potential for the future" said local volunteer hostess Isabel Velásquez, who said the project helps her "survive, have an income and do something positive."

Thirty years ago "the situation was different," said Gerónimo Matute Hernández, an elder in the community and co-founder of the turtle conservation project. "Lots of turtles came back then. We never thought they'd run out, so we didn't take care of them." ■

