

# ESCAPE

A LEATHERBACK TURTLE  
RESTS ON THE COSTA  
RICAN COASTLINE



# International rescue

*Volunteering on a research project gets you closer than ever to some of the world's most endangered species – as STANLEY JOHNSON discovered, patrolling Costa Rica's beaches to help save the leatherback turtle*

Patrolling a two-mile-long windswept beach, hour after hour in pouring rain while the Pacific surf pounds relentlessly, swamping your already sodden limbs, may not be everyone's idea of fun. During the week I spent on Playa Grande with the Earthwatch team, in Costa Rica's remote Guanacaste Province, we must have walked 10 or 12 miles a night. We would start our patrol three hours before high tide and continue until three hours after, returning at daybreak – foot-sore and soaked to the skin – in time to catch a few hours' sleep. But, when you're helping to save the endangered leatherback turtle – you don't really think about the discomfort.

On the expedition I joined last October were four Earthwatch volunteers, all totally committed. Rick, 26, from Brazil, and Adrian, 36, from the UK, both work for a bank; Nick, 23, works for the Ocean Institute in California; and Catherine, 31, is a marine biologist from Texas. They had all taken time off from their high-powered jobs to help the turtles and, from conversations we had over breakfasts in the local eatery after a hard night on the beach, I knew they didn't regret it.

For the past 25 years, men and women from all over the world have been volunteering to take part in this amazing endeavour. They have been out there, year in, year out, pacing the sands throughout the entire six-month nesting season of the leatherback turtle, and – believe me – if they weren't there, the plight of this mighty animal would be even more precarious than it is.

The harsh truth is that, in the Pacific Ocean at least, the leatherback turtle is critically

endangered. Its nesting beaches, all around the Pacific Rim, have been turned into seaside resorts. If a female leatherback does manage to reach the shore to lay her eggs, she may be hacked to pieces by waiting gangs, or her eggs, once laid, may be ruthlessly plundered. Industrial fishing, particularly long-lining, has further contributed to the tragic decline in leatherback numbers.

Playa Grande offers the last best hope of saving the species from extinction in the Pacific. Miraculously, the big-time developers have not yet got their claws into this part of the Costa Rican coastline. The bright lights from hotels and housing developments, so off-putting to the nesting turtle, do not shine here. Not yet, anyway. The local authorities have now declared Playa Grande and two neighbouring beaches a marine National Park, called Las Baulas.

The Earthwatch team at Playa Grande research station doesn't just protect the turtles and their nests; they run a hatchery, too. If, during the course of their beach patrols, the volunteers find a leatherback laying eggs below the high-tide mark, they will carefully collect them and move them to the hatchery for safety. A leatherback at Las Baulas lays 65 eggs per clutch, seven clutches a season and nests every three to four years. Every egg protected, every hatchling saved, increases the chances of a turtle surviving to maturity,' project leader Bibi tells me.

A quarter of a century ago, there were around 90,000 mating female leatherbacks to be found in the Pacific. Today, there are fewer than 5000. Witnessing this giant creature – which weighs almost a tonne – emerging at dead of night from the rolling Pacific sea-surge, hauling itself up onto the beach to lay its eggs, before heading back to the ocean, is one of the most stirring spectacles you are ever likely to experience. There is something primeval, elemental, about it.

Long after I had returned to England after my time patrolling Playa Grande every night, the roar of the ocean echoed in my ears. I could still see the phosphorescent foam of the waves, hear the howl of the wind. It took days for my shoes, soaked to the soles every night with salt water, to recover. □

*Witnessing this giant creature hauling itself up on to the beach is a truly stirring spectacle*

*Earthwatch (01867 318 831; [www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org)) is an international environmental charity, supporting over 130 field research projects in 50 countries by providing funds and sending groups of paying volunteers to work alongside leading scientists. The Costa Rican Sea Turtles expedition always needs volunteers throughout the nesting and hatching season, from October to February inclusive. The project costs from £1,250, which is a charitable donation that helps to fund the research; it also covers all food, training, accommodation and the cost of offsetting greenhouse gas emissions. For more information about the conservation of the leatherback turtle, visit [www.leatherback.org](http://www.leatherback.org).*