

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:

Tracks Across Tracks

Laura Sarti uses a bandana to reign in her bushy shock of woolly hair. Raised in Mexico City, she first whiffed her love of nature at the impressionable age of nineteen. During a course in field biology Laura made an extended visit to the town of Caleta de Campo. "I liked so much the people of this town, the fishermen, the women, the boats, everything." Caleta de Campo happened to be near the famed Leatherback beach at Mexiquillo, when thousands of Leatherbacks nested there. Twenty-five years later, Laura works for Mexico's Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources, and she's seen Leatherback numbers plummeting "The trend is zoom," she gestures, "—down. Extreme down. But because this is a 'good' year, we will get our sense of how many Leatherbacks are left."

Today we will survey lower Baja's beaches. We lift wheels from La Paz at around 10:30 in the morning. A series of rivers dry as bone dust, run their sandy beds to the salty sea. Thus meet two kinds of desert, both hazardous to humans, both rich with life. We drop to 300 feet and begin surveying the beach. Laura asks me to take a photograph of the tire tracks of all-terrain-vehicles that riddle and run the beach, both near houses and far from any homes, all its desertified length. The ATV tracks make it difficult to look for turtle tracks. Even Laura, despite her experience, complains, "With all these ATVs—"

A little past eleven, the shore turns limestone-armored, like a desertified coast of Maine. After a few miles we come to a long ribbon of sand. The beach again bears many tracks—SUVs, ATVs, people on foot, and dogs, all have left their impression. But for miles, turtle tracks remain absent. Then I suddenly notice a slight depression and immediately Laura says, "That looks like a nest, Carl. An old one. We will count it." Two more appear within the mile. We can't actually see nest chambers or eggs, of course. At best, tracks and digging are all we actually can see. A flock of shorebirds explodes from one sandy shore like a charge of shot. We record five more Leatherback nests. Biologists have found and surrounded these nests with upright sticks, hoping to ward away the ATVs. We see a turtle hatchery, a fenced area where biologists re-bury eggs dug from perilous places, and some fishermen drying a net on the beach. Several more nests a mile down the beach lie unprotected.

By noon we're at Cabo San Jose. Up ahead is Cabo San Lucas, "The affluent area," says Sandy. Cabo San Lucas is full of high-rise hotels on the beachfront, and marinas with big boats. Mansion swimming pools jut from the cliff slopes on which palaces perch. Sandy is saying they've found people lying on beach blankets spread atop Leatherback nests. She adds, "Thirty years ago there was nothing here, just a little fishing camp." Laura speaks, "Incredible. All the coast here is used. All." Sandy yells, "Ooh!; got a whale right here." Four Gray Whales are navigating their marbled hulks just beyond the breakers. Sandy says, "I think grays are just the sexiest whales, so shapely, like ladies in gray satin dresses. I mean, look at those flukes!"

Also within view are several trawlers dragging their nets for shrimp, and possibly drowning turtles along the way. Everywhere they move, these turtles run a constant gauntlet of human presence, through the seas, along the coast, on the beach. But Laura reminds me that shrimp boats are now required to use nets equipped with turtle-escape devices. Do they? Laura, with a deep nod, answers, "Yes. They use. Sometimes they are tying the opening shut. But they are checked." As if reading my skepticism, Sandy adds, "Something has changed. When I did the first survey twelve years ago, some beaches had just a string of turtle shells and carcasses. It was, like, 'Muerto. Otro muerto. Otro muerto.' It's a big change. Whether it's enough, I don't know, but it is a big change." As if responding to the same positive news, Leatherback nests begin slowly to accrue on the beach below, some old, some of their massively churned tracks very recent.

That doesn't mean full and lasting peace for turtles. We are far enough now from tourist dollars that there are no structures, not even roads as far as my eye can see. Yet the ATV tracks continue along the beach even here. And Laura adds, "This beach will be next to have hotels built." We've flown 350 miles this morning along the ragged coast's irregular contour, and we've logged 107 Leatherback nests, far more than we expected. All of us are surprised. Laura says, "Last year was the worst year in 20 years, and we saw zero nests where we saw a hundred today."