

This article was published in the March-April 2007 issue of New Moon Magazine (www.newmoon.org)

The Turtle Patrol
By Rebecca Lawrence

In front of me, a gentle giant struggles to turn to the sea while behind me, another one gives birth to a hundred more. I am in Costa Rica, in Central America in a tiny coastal town called Parismina, in search of sea turtles.

When I was in second grade, my then-teacher announced that she was going to coordinate a school trip to Costa Rica for fourth-and-fifth graders. Two years later, she still does it every spring break, and last spring (April 2006), I was old enough to go.

The tour group, EcoTeach, leads students on trips in Costa Rica. Most participants are from the Pacific Northwest. The trips focus on environmental science, culture and saving two different endangered species there: scarlet macaws and the Leatherback sea turtles. Our group studied the turtles. Leatherback sea turtles are about four-and-a-half to six feet long, weigh up to one ton and are an acutely endangered species.

As part of the ten-day tour, we spent two nights in Parismina. It is actually an island on the Caribbean, separated from the mainland by the Parismina River. It has a small airstrip, but people mainly reach it by boat. We buzzed in by motorboat at about 3:30 pm on April 8, 2006. At six that night, we had the “turtle talk,” a lecture on what to look for and the turtle’s egg-laying habits. Here are some things I learned:

- Leatherback turtles lay about 100 eggs per nest, but only one in 100 make it through the first year and one in 1,000 will reach adulthood.
- Poachers look for eggs to sell to make money. The eggs usually are eaten (because men think it makes them tough) and used in various other ways. This is one cause of the turtle’s endangerment, and therefore, it is illegal.
- While the mother is laying her eggs, she goes into a trance. The researchers (me!) reach down into the nest and catch the eggs as the mother lays them. They are then taken to a hatchery, which is safe from any poachers.

My patrol group (the coordinator/teacher; her friend/a substitute at my school; a boy named Pat; his sister; their mom; me, and my dad and a guide) set off for our four-hour shift at 8:00 pm. We went at night because turtles need the cover of the darkness to lay eggs and never lay in the daytime. We walked for hours, but to no avail. We saw nothing but driftwood, sand and cloudy gray sky that night.

The second night, our group had the 10:00 pm—2:00 am shift. But at about nine, it started to rain - a heavy, humid tropical rain. The rain was pouring off the edge of the roof onto the cement walk. Pat and I pranced out into the downpour—it was warm and humid unlike our native Seattle, Washington rain. I wanted to see a turtle so much! Pat and I started “praying to the turtle gods” and making up “turtle dances” to “summon the turtles out of sacred waters.” We knew we were just being silly, but maybe we weren’t. . . .

At five minutes to ten that night, our guide arrived. He was a quick, agile fellow, and he only spoke Spanish. Luckily, the guide from the tour company was in our group, also. Her name is Rocio. For the first hour, we walked in the same way as the first night, but then we struck gold. Pure gold.

I had been walking down the beach, counting my steps and trying to get to one mile (5,280 feet). I was just about to die of boredom when I heard Pat’s mom, Shannon, softly call “Turtle! They

found one!" I looked up and in front of me, there were a path of footprints coming up from the sea. And in front of *that*, there was what looked like a beaver dam. I thought that the footprints were the turtle tracks, and when I saw the guide dart over to the so-called "beaver dam," I was confused. Then, the guide called us over and the substitute, Ms. Lih, led us up to the "beaver dam." THOSE were the turtle's tracks (The footprints had nothing to do with it). We crouched behind it, waiting for the turtle to finish digging the egg's nest. Finally it finished and we could go up to it. The guide drew out a record sheet and asked Ms. Lih to write down the turtle's record numbers (which help keep track of the turtle's whereabouts), while everyone else, under Rocio's watchful eye, began to dig out the nest.

The eggs inside were slimy, almost perfectly round and fragile; they would dent slightly at one's lightest touch. We gently stored them in a candy-striped plastic bag. We would bury them once again at the hatchery later.

While our turtle "covered up its eggs" we were allowed to touch it, stroke its weathered back. Rocio and the guide took a tape measure and measured its size. All those numbers went on the record sheet. But while everyone else was stroking and crooning to the turtle, I looked off in the distance. I saw what appeared to be a piece of driftwood. But wait—a *moving* piece of driftwood?

"Turtle!" I called. "There's another turtle out there!"

We weren't allowed to go to it yet—having just come out of the water it was not yet in a trance. But when we were (after watching the somewhat funny, somewhat saddening scene of the first turtle detach itself from the sand hill it had been shoved up against and turn towards the sea—the second turtle was smarter, having climbed the sandy hill and turned herself around before beginning to dig), the procedure was much the same—except for one thing.

"Well, what do you think we should name her?" said Rocio.

My jaw dropped. I, in all my years of reminiscing about taking this trip, had never thought we would get to *name* a turtle! Someone, I think it was Pat's mom, Shannon, suggested we name her for the rain that had fallen hours before. I then suggested we name her Rocio, for our outstanding guide. The main coordinator and teacher who started the whole thing, Ms. Moon, asked Rocio if there was already one named for her. She said no, and then said the name Rocio means something like "Rain falling on a flower," which fit with Shannon's idea of naming her for the rain. So the turtle was named Rocio.

The trip I took was an amazing experience. I never thought I would ever touch an endangered species, or name a sea turtle. The other highlights of my trip were:

- River rafting on the Sarapiquí (pronounced sa-ra-PEE- kee) River
- Spending two nights living with a farm family
- Horseback riding without a helmet!

Pura Vida!

(Means pure life, the Spanish equivalent of "cool!" or "awesome!")