



Volunteer Program

Description

Program for the Conservation and Research of Marine Turtles, **Quelonios del Caribe Station**.

Location

Quelonios del Caribe Station is located on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast in Limon Province, Siquierres County, exactly 1 km north of the mouth of Rio Pacuare (the Pacuare River).

Climate

Predominantly tropical rainforest, the area enjoys average annual temperatures of



26°C (83°F), with annual rainfall between 4500 and 6000 millimeters (approx. 95in.), making it one of the wettest zones in Costa Rica.

Flora

The area is home to 400 species of trees and 2000 species of plants, among which are the beach grape, “caco”, coconut palm, water lily, water ferns, “pilón”, “canfin”, and “jicaro de montaña”.



Fauna

Between the mountains and plains of Tortuguera, you may encounter jaguars, tapirs, river otters, ocelots, manatees, sloths and monkeys. Turtles abound, and among those found nesting here are the Leatherback, Loggerhead, Hawksbill, and Green turtles, the latter being the most abundant. The area is also home to a large variety of bird species.



Rationale

The main focus of the project is the protection of marine turtles, as well as the improvement of quality of life for the local communities.

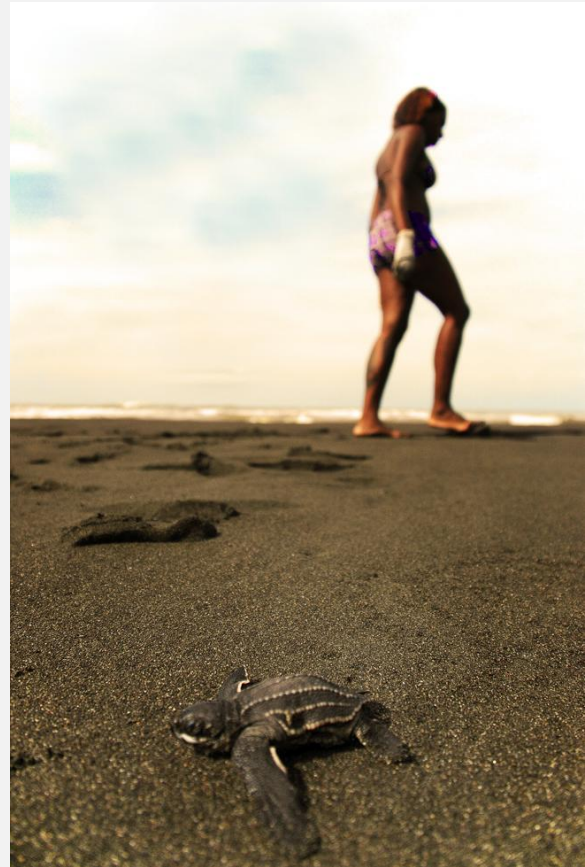
At the time of the project's inception, people from the local communities were engaged in the illegal removal and trade in turtle eggs, as well as illegal sale of turtle meat for



profit. However, far from being hardened black marketeers, these people had turned to illegal trade simply as the most accessible means of support and livelihood for their families and themselves. So, the idea of starting a conservation program in the area threatened the basic survival needs of these same people.

From the beginning, then, the project needed to guarantee that income generated by the conservation program(s) would be invested in the local communities to help provide much needed support and to achieve sustainable livelihood benefits.

Initially, one of the biggest hurdles was to convince the people who had been involved in decimating the turtle populations to take on the role of caretakers and stewards of the turtles. When the program idea finally came to fruition, it was with a firm commitment to the local populace that they would be



provided on-going employment and income by cooperating with the various conservation projects. Since then, the people have been trained and qualified for various positions within the project, including working with volunteers and a variety of other program activities.

Hence, the “**Quelonios del Caribe**” marine turtle project was created as a joint effort with the peoples of Barra de Pacuare (the local township and its surrounds) for the purpose of the preservation and conservation of marine turtles, in particular, giant Leatherbacks, Hawksbills, and Green Sea turtles, which not only depend

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on the area for nesting, but are also threatened with extinction.

Of equal importance to marine turtle protection is the conservation of the area's surrounding rain forests. The project is making important inroads in developing a model community-based conservation program to include butterfly gardens, wherein volunteers can aid in the research of butterfly development and preservation, self-sustainable organic vegetable gardens, as well as the construction of community trails where volunteers can work alongside local peoples helping to improve the trail systems.



This project consists of two (2) distinct stages annually:

1. Specific marine turtle conservation projects
2. Related projects, such as those described above.

1. Specific marine turtle projects

General Objectives

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1. Integrated, professional, and systematic protection and investigation of spawning marine turtles encompassing an area 3 kilometers north and 2 kilometers south of the mouth of Rio Pacuare.
2. Promotion of conservation awareness and sense of ownership for the project conservation policies amongst the peoples of Barra de Pacuare.
3. Develop environmental education programs both in the community of Barra de Pacuare and in the areas directly or indirectly influenced by the township.

Specific Objectives

a) Instill within the Barra de Pacuare community a heightened awareness of the need for protecting the spawning marine turtles nesting in the area.

b) Implement and execute a methodology of control and protection of the marine turtles.

c) Promote within the Barra de Pacuare community environmental education activities that engage the peoples in social actions aimed at contributing to the betterment, protection, and revitalization of the natural environment.



d) Establish for the peoples of Barra de Pacuare and its surrounds an environmental education program that not only creates awareness, but also helps put a viable conservation program into action.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers are able to take part in the following activities:

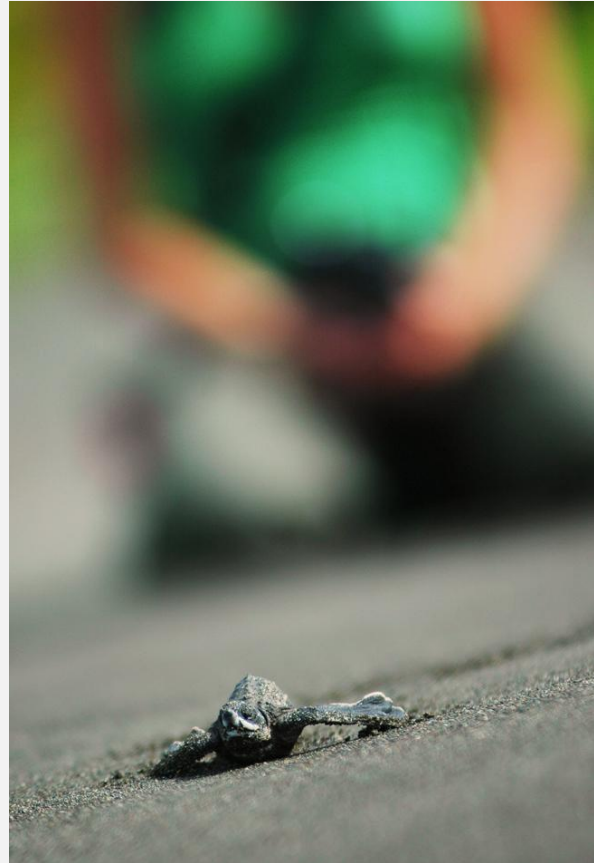
- Attend a training presentation that qualifies them to work directly with marine turtles.
- Participate in nightly beach patrols for the protection of marine turtles.
- Assist in cleaning the immediate surrounds of nesting zones.
- Identify and account for turtle tracks on the beaches.
- Search for turtle nests.
- Count numbers of eggs found in each nest and relocate the eggs to a secure egg nursery.
- Monitor relocated turtle nests; monitor nest temperatures.
- Assist in freeing baby turtles for their initial journey to sea.
- Take biometric measurements of turtles.
- Assist in butterfly garden activities.
- Work in the organic gardens and in trail building activities.
- Participate in local cultural activities.
- Assist in a variety of maintenance activities.



The project has three well-defined turtle seasons:

a. **Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*):** The largest of marine turtles, it can measure up to 3 meters in size, weigh up to 900 kg and live from 60 to 70 years; its preferred food is jellyfish. Lacking a hardened shell, the Leatherback has an

interior skeleton of narrow ribs linked by tiny bony plates all encased by a thick shell of leathery, cartilaginous skin. They have been shown to dive to depths of 1000 meters where their small lungs and flexible frames can withstand both great pressure and waters as cold as 10°C. **The nesting season for Leatherbacks in Barra de Pacuare runs from February 15th each year through the first week of July.**



b. **Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*):** Usually encountered singly or in small groups along rocky coasts

and coral reefs, they feed on sponges, algae, crustaceans and fish, using their sharp beaks for eating (they have no teeth). Hawksbills measure approximately 1 meter in length, weigh in around 80 kg, and produce around 150 eggs. **In the Barra de Pacuare project, the Hawksbill season begins in May and ends the last week of July.**

c. **Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*):** Weighing up to 140 kg, the Green can grow to more than a meter in length. The female nests every two or more years, averages 2.8 to 6 nests per season with an average 114 eggs per nest. They prefer a diet of seaweeds. **The nesting season for Green Turtles in Barra de Pacuare begins July 15th each year and culminates October 15th.**

2. Related projects



General Objective:

- Break the cycle of poaching turtles for gain and profit among the Caribbean coastal communities of Costa Rica.



Specific Objectives:

- Seek viable economic alternatives for the peoples of Barra de Pacuare in order to lessen pressure on marine populations.
- Generate new livelihood support activities for the peoples of Barra de Pacuare.
- Integrate into the area species of flora and fauna having both commercial and scientific value, and which can aid in the community's economic development.



- Create alternative food resources for local consumption.
- Replace the stereotype of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast from that of turtle exploitation to that of guardianship of turtles and other environmental areas.

Within the spectrum of “related projects” are plans for fish and shrimp farming, butterfly gardens, composting projects including worm cultivation, animal husbandry via raising both chickens and hogs, organic and natural gardening.

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- Fish farms (aquaculture) – the goal is to raise fish as a source of protein for the local communities as well as participating volunteers. In addition, the fish farms will generate new, alternative income sources for the local communities while assisting in the funding of turtle projects.

- To meet project goals, we must:

- Produce fish feed
- Provide nutrition (feed) for fish
- Monitor fish tank oxygenation levels
- Other activities as required



- Shrimp farms – just as with the fish farms, the goal is to raise shrimp as a source of protein for the local communities as well as participating volunteers. In addition, the shrimp farms will generate new,

alternative income sources for the local communities while assisting in the funding of turtle projects.

- To meet project goals, we must:

- Produce feed for the shrimp
- Feed the shrimp
- Monitor shrimp tank oxygenation levels

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- Hog farming – the goal in raising hogs is not only to provide alternative food and income sources, but also to utilize hog manure in support of composting projects.



- To meet project goals, we must:

- Prepare hog feed
- Feed the hogs
- Clean hog enclosures
- Other activities as required



- Composting –also known as brown manure, compost consists of aerobically decomposed remnants of organic matter, such as grasses, leaves, table scraps (no meat or dairy), animal excreta and other organic substances; generally used to feed, condition, and fertilize soil for cultivation.

- To meet project goals, we must:

- Collect the hog manure
- Mix manure into the compost
- Clean the area around composter
- Other activities as required

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- Butterfly Garden – our goal in constructing the 400 square meter garden is to raise Blue Morpho butterflies and free them into the wild. A large blue butterfly that lives in the tropical rainforests of Costa Rica, the

Blue Morpho population is being decimated gradually thanks to human incursion in the forests and destruction of the butterfly's habitat. We hope to help reverse that trend.

Note that this project functions year round.

- To meet project goals, we must:

- Keep the area constantly cleaned
- Collect cocoons
- Relocate cocoons to a safe “nursery”
- Tally the number of caterpillars produced
- Locate and monitor eggs and caterpillars in their primary stages of development
- Other activities as required

- Sustainable farming – our goal is to create a small farm located near the Quelonios del Caribe station to produce enough fruits and vegetables to supply the needs of the station, enabling it to become self-sustaining. It should generate, as well, employment, income, and edibles for the local populations.



- To meet project goals, we must:

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- Plant and sow different products as necessary
- Maintain the area weed free
- Fertilize and irrigate the area
- Harvest food products
- Other activities as required

Communities located near the project

- **Tortuguero:** 20 kilometers distance

Other protected areas nearby:

- **RNVS Barra del Colorado** and **Tortuguero National Park:** approximately 20 kilometers distance via boat canal

Free Time and Relaxation

Nearby canals provide exceptional causeways for observing a great diversity of flora, birds and other animals, such as monkeys, who are always curious about passing boats and visitors.



Regulations:

- Consumption of alcohol or other stimulants is not allowed.
- Daily participation in housecleaning activities.
- Maintain good personal habits and conduct, including basic hygiene and respectful vocabulary.

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- Shirts must be worn at all meals.

Equipment to bring:

- Sheets and blankets
- Mosquito repellent
- Mosquito net
- Sunscreen
- Personal items (deodorant, soap, toothbrush/paste, shampoo, sanitary needs, etc)
- Sandals
- Closed shoes (athletic shoes or light hiking boots)



Station Capacity

Minimum: 1 Volunteer

Maximum: 24 volunteers

FAQ's

Are male volunteers preferred over female volunteers?

No.

What level of Spanish is needed?

Basic.

Is there a minimum age requirement?

Yes, 18 years old.

What is the daily schedule like?

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Generally, volunteers are on duty from 8am to 4pm.

However, our principle work takes place during the nightly patrols for marine turtle protection and collection of information.

Is experience necessary?

No prior experience is necessary, however you must have the ability to adapt to a tropical environment, be in excellent health, and willing to help in the conservation of marine turtles and other natural resources.

What is the housing like?



Quelonios del Caribe Station is housed in a large building with good-sized bedrooms with bunk beds. There is no electricity at the station, although a generator is operational for 3 hours every night to provide current. The station also has potable drinking water and a cell phone for emergencies.

What are meals like?

The station provides three main meals per day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. Among the staples are rice and beans, pastas, simple grains, meats, fruits, and vegetables.

PLEASE NOTE – We do not have the capacity to provide a safe area to protect valuables. Hence, you would be well advised to bring only those items necessary for your daily needs.

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Association of Volunteers for Service in Protected Areas

Contact Us
info@asvocr.org
www.asvocr.org

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