

Turtle Power!

On Saturday 14th May 2005 I had the honour, privilege and blessing to observe a giant leatherback turtle nesting on Rosalie Beach on the South East Coast of Dominica. To be in close proximity to this magnificent creature was absolutely awe inspiring as she dutifully carried out the obligations of nature by crawling onto the beach, digging a large hole and depositing her tennis-ball size eggs within it. Under the pale light of the half moon with over 50 observers she laid 133 eggs of which 90 have the potential to grow into hatchlings – the other eggs are empty and laid to cushion the others and allow air to circulate freely amongst them. The group in attendance to this labour of love gazed on as the turtle finished laying and then carefully covered the eggs with sand using her powerful flippers. She then manoeuvred herself around the area in an attempt to camouflage the specific location of the nest before turning and slowly pulling herself back towards the sea. After all her hard work and effort the sight of her disappearing into the crashing waves brought tears to my eyes and I sent a silent prayer of thanks for her survival and hope that she would be kept safe until the next time.

This wonderful and magical encounter was made possible by the Rosalie Sea Turtle Initiative (RoSTI), headed by Rowan Byrne. The project, which has been in operation since 2003, has already managed to save up to 90% of the turtles from one of their major predators – human poachers who kill them to sell the meat. Whilst this has for many years been a socially acceptable cultural practice it is now threatening to devastate the population of turtles and force them into extinction. Turtles can live until 70 years old yet only start reproducing between 25 to 50 years of age. There is also a naturally high mortality rate for hatchlings and out of 1000 eggs laid only one will survive to maturity 25 years from now. It is because of these factors that the additional threats posed by humans push the turtles high on the endangered species list and, as Byrne stresses, even the strictest of conservation attempts made now will only start to pay off in the next 50 years.

Some have argued against conservation stating that they need to make money from the sale of the meat. However conservation does not have to equal poverty and the watching of turtles by tourist and local visitors is a viable economic industry which yields millions of dollars worldwide annually. Currently ROSTI has 9 paid Dominican workers to oversee the egg hatching and patrol for poachers and with further local funding and support to spread throughout the island, this figure will continue to rise. The additional benefit of making money via watching rather than poaching the turtles is that we get to save and protect a natural resource and will ensure that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the experience of seeing these animals first hand rather than as a picture in a book or as a distant memory.

After seeing this ancient and majestic creature myself, listening to her labour efforts and touching her silky soft shell I have to urge others to take the opportunity to do the same. Leatherback, Hawksbill and Green turtles arrive yearly to reproduce and lay eggs on beaches and in Dominica nesting season lasts from March to October annually. Visits to the beaches can be made by contacting RoSTI. It is **not** recommended that people make independent journeys to view the turtles as without expert guidance and timing the creatures are often scared from the beach before they even begin to nest – a process which can last up to two hours if executed correctly with RoSTI & Forestry staff.

As part of the 2005 Dive Fest RoSTI has a 'Sea Turtle Hatchling Day' planned on July 3rd at Rosalie where families will be able to watch hundreds of the baby turtles emerge and make their first run for the freedom of the sea. There will also be other activities on the day such as sea turtle sand sculpting and a raffle and families are encouraged to attend this memorable occasion. Further details can be obtained by calling 225 7742 and from Dive Fest promotional materials.

Turtles share our home of Dominica - let us welcome, honour and protect them so they continue to grace us with their presence for years to come.

Terri Henry
May 2005