

“Saving Sea Turtles”: Examining the Efficacy of American Conservation Efforts in Mexico

This paper explores how cultural differences can disorient American marine turtle conservationists and impede enduring resolutions. All six of Mexico’s marine turtle species are in danger of extinction, largely due to anthropogenic habitat destruction and egg poaching. While many American conservancies have had success in relocating nests and releasing hatchlings, these efforts address symptoms rather than core concerns. Told partially through narrative of experiences working with El Grupo Ecologico in Nayarit, this paper expounds upon interactions with poachers, who are also police officers, fishermen, and parents, to build a greater framework of understanding. Villainizing poachers often blinds conservationists from comprehending the moral calculus of what leads an individual to poach. Interviews with locals identified the cultural significance of turtle eggs, economic disparity, police corruption, and failing fisheries as incentives for poaching. Further discussion of relevant literature supports these findings, and reveals why international and Mexican domestic policies have failed in application. The goal of this paper is to identify barriers that prevent conservancy-based ecosystem monitoring from becoming community-based ecosystem motoring. Recognizing ideological, linguistic, and cultural barriers is critical to building relationships with a community. The clash between El Grupo Ecologico and poachers is a specific example of polarized ideologies, but its struggles are mirrored across Mexico and Latin America. American institutions can never hope to solve these deeper political and socioeconomic issues: for those who grow up in privilege cannot wholly comprehend the complex dynamics of the developing world. However, they can foster a new generation of conservationists, empowering people and learning from them in turn. The recognition of difference is critical to setting realistic goals. Understanding the extent to which American conservancies can benefit communities, and when to instead enable a community to benefit itself, is the only way in which sustainable turtle conservation can be achieved.

Key Words: marine turtles, sea turtles, poaching, community-based ecosystem monitoring, culture, conservation, eggs, policy.