

University of New Mexico
UNM Digital Repository

NotiCen

Latin America Digital Beat (LADB)

3-11-2010

Costa Rica: Leatherback Nesting Ground At Risk

Leslie Josephs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Josephs, Leslie. "Costa Rica: Leatherback Nesting Ground At Risk." (2010). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9774>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Costa Rica: Leatherback Nesting Ground At Risk

by Leslie Josephs

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 2010-03-11

[The following article by Leslie Josephs is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas/Latinamerica Press in Lima, Peru. It was posted March 10, 2010]

Up and down Costa Rica's Pacific coast are thousands of beach houses, hotels, and condominiums, part of the real estate boom that started here in the 1990s, fueled largely by wealthy foreigners looking to escape cold northern winters.

But on Playa Grande, a strip of pristine, powdery sand that is the last major nesting ground for endangered leatherback turtles in the eastern Pacific, the boom has not hit. Yet.

The government of outgoing President Oscar Arias is trying to push through the legislature a reform that would open the area to real estate development that has overrun parts of the coast, threatening the already-endangered turtles.

Las Baulas National Marine Park was created in 1991 in an effort to protect the species whose nesting populations had shown a rapid decline years earlier.

The park means that 125 meters of land from the average high-tide point are protected. The few dozen lived-in housing units along the coast are required to use specially designed red and green lights at night so as not to disturb the turtles as they are nesting. Last year, Arias' government proposed downgrading the national park to a refuge, which would protect only 75 meters of land, so that homeowners within the park could continue their stalled construction projects and move in, saving the government hundreds of millions in expropriation fees.

Two-pronged problem

Still, despite nearly two decades of protection efforts under the national park, the turtle populations are still declining, in large part because of longline fishing and by gillnet boats that trap the turtles during their migrating season near the coasts of Peru and Chile, both nations that have giant fishing industries.

"Seven or eight years ago, we were counting 100 turtles a night," said park guide Danilo Campos. "Only 28 came out the entire year last year."

Coupled with potential development along the beach, the results could be disastrous.

Randall Arauz, the founder and director of Costa Rican environmental organization Programa Restauracion de Tortugas Marinas (PRETOMA), said protecting the turtles on Costa Rican soil is

easier than stopping the longline and gillnet boats in the eastern and southern Pacific waters, an international problem.

"What the fishers catch on these longlines are the reproductive females," said Arauz. "Costa Rica has nothing to do with all this adult mortality. All these international longline boats are coming to fin sharks."

The leatherback turtles nest from Mexico to Costa Rica, from November to February or March. Arauz says the leatherback beaches in Nicaragua and Mexico as well as another in Costa Rica have all seen their populations tumble, and, thanks to the 20 years of protection efforts here, Playa Grande has become the only remaining leatherback nesting ground in the region.

"And why is that? Now the leatherbacks we have nesting are the ones we started protecting 15 years ago," he said.

Contradictory policies

Costa Rica, which is known for having one of the most stringent environmental policies in the Americas, is now seeking to loosen its laws.

In the last 15 years, lots were sold behind the nesting beaches, within the national-park borders. To maintain the park, the government would have to pay off the housing owners.

Last year, the Ministerio de Ambiente, Energia y Telecomunicaciones (MINAET) proposed a bill to strip Las Baulas of its national-park status and cut the protected area by almost two-thirds.

"If we would have allowed these developments in the 1990s, these turtles that we're protecting now would have no habitat to come back to," said Arauz. "We have to stop the development."

Some homeowners who purchased lots some 15 years ago have already constructed houses. One owner said he was only waiting for his windows to be installed.

But, if the law to downgrade the park does not pass in the 57-seat unicameral Asamblea Legislativa by the end of the legislative term on April 30, the government will have to pay the homeowners to expropriate the property, even though it is built on a national park.

"There are at least 40 owners. They sold the lots to people...who thought, 'What a beautiful beach. How much does that cost? Oh, a lot cheaper than California.' And then, 'What, you're telling me it's a national park and I can't build?'" said Arauz.

Arauz added that the buyers were either ripped off and were not told the property was on a national park or were advised but didn't care.

"We're not going to let you get away with it," he said.

Major environmental organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Conservation International, Oceania, and the Nature Conservancy have thrown their support behind maintaining Las Baulas' national-park status.

In early March, the Contraloria General de la Republic (comptroller's office) issued a report that harshly criticized MINAET for "weak" management of the park.

It said the bill sprung up because of the "unmanageable situation" in the park and to only avoid paying for the land, the value of which, the owners say, has risen since they purchased it.

"But the problem and the threats to the turtles' habitat could continue slowly over the years, which could be environmentally irreversible."

If the demotion bill does not pass, the government would have to pay as much as US\$500 million by some estimates.

"If it gets defeated, the following day, we're filing a lawsuit," Arauz said.

-- End --