

# *Saving the World's Sea Turtles*

It's late at night by the time the turtle emerges from the sea. The female loggerhead, weighing easily over 300 pounds, slowly drags herself up the Georgia beach.

*By Allison Ravenscroft*

When she reaches what she considers a suitable destination, she excavates her "body pit," clearing sand and plants out of the way and begins digging her nest, scooping out sand with her back flippers. The end result is a hole about two feet deep in the shape of an upside-down light-bulb. As she starts laying her white leathery eggs, each about the size of a ping-pong ball, she enters a trance-like state, from which she won't emerge until she has finished depositing anywhere from 70 to 150 eggs in the nest. Quietly observing that the turtle is laying and in her "nesting trance" three people step from the darkness to surround her.



**I**t's all right. They're working with the Caretta Research Project, the oldest volunteer-based sea turtle program that has been protecting Georgia's Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) sea turtles since 1973.

Every summer volunteers join with project directors Kris Williams and Mike Frick for a week of hands-on research, education and conservation on Wassaw Island National Wildlife Refuge, a Georgia barrier island.

The volunteers work quickly to record data for research, including taking the turtle's measurements (generally about 90 cm or 35.4 inches), and looking for tags (they'll tag her if she doesn't have tags already). Current research projects concern sea turtle epibiots – the animals that live upon turtles, satellite tagging, endochronology studies and genetics work. The volunteers mark the nest's location and stand back as the turtle finishes laying and covering her nest. Surveying the nest's location, the humans decide the turtle has chosen a safe place.

Approximately one hour after she emerged, the turtle begins her slow descent back to the ocean, and the group takes over where nature left off – covering the nest with a metal screen to thwart raccoons and other predators. By the time the turtle has reached the water's edge, the group is already moving down the beach, peering through the night at the sand for signs of the next turtle crawl, the telltale set of tracks turtles leave as they drag themselves through the sand.

Approximately 60 days after the eggs were laid, the eggs will hatch. During the second half of "turtling" season (which occurs from May through early September) the volunteers will check the nests several times a night to see if any hatchlings have emerged. When the baby turtles do surface, the volunteers will act as "bodyguards," making sure no predators catch them as they make their descent down to the ocean.

The Caretta Research Project is one of the programs working to save our world's seven species of sea turtle. It is critical work, as all sea turtles are currently listed as endangered or threatened.

This specific program preserves and protects nesting sites in order to assure more turtles make it in the ocean. However, in order to prevent the extinction of the sea turtles, environmental groups globally are recognizing that they must take a multi-tiered approach to preservation.

The dangers for turtles are many. For example, in spite of the laws in the U.S. and Mexico protecting sea turtles, the black market sea turtle trade in these areas and others, continues to thrive. There are many profitable reasons to break the law and destroy these amazing creatures.

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Turtles aren't just killed for their shells. Many cultures revere turtle meat as the best seafood. The eggs are believed to help fertility and virility, the blood thought to aid anemia, and turtle oil is viewed as a great remedy for a cold. Unfortunately, that means that while the population of sea turtles is decreasing, the population of those who enjoy turtle products is growing.

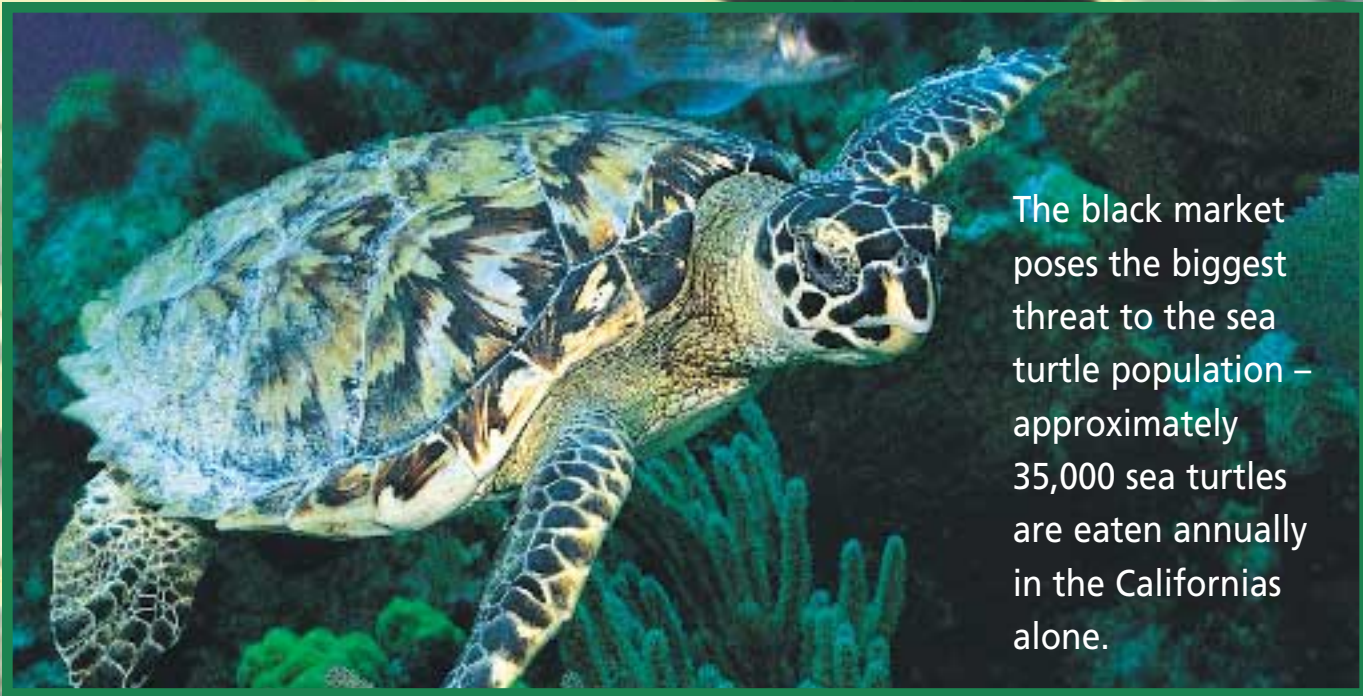
WILDCOAST, a partner-based international conservation team, shares the mission of The Caretta Research Project – to preserve and protect our world's sea turtles.

This program works to recover and safeguard the five species of sea turtles – Loggerhead, East Pacific Green (also called The Black Turtle), Leatherback, Ridley and Hawksbill – found in Baja California's waters. WILDCOAST recognizes that protection in Baja California's waters is "critical to stability and recovery of the Pacific Sea Turtle population," as these turtles migrate from places as distant as Japan, Hawaii and Southern Mexico to feed, grow, and/or nest. Based in a different culture, the program uses a community-based approach and works with the U.S. and Mexican governments and environmental groups to change how people view and treat sea turtles.

It's a difficult task. The peninsula of Baja California, Mexico, covers a very large area, 1,000 miles long just South of the state of California. Although environmental laws regarding endangered species are strict, they are rarely enforced. In 1990, the Mexican government passed a law making the killing of sea turtles an offense punishable by up to 12 years in jail; yet at the most recent Meeting of the Sea Turtle Conservation Network of the Californias, no one could document even one time in the past year when an offender was actually punished for killing one of these special creatures.

Community-based conservation is the key to WILDCOAST's strategy. Similar to programs in Africa where companies hire locals to help run wildlife refuges,





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directors Serge Dedina, Ph.D., and Wallace J. Nichols, Ph.D., partner with local citizens for WILD COAST's preservation and research efforts. After discussing with citizens different choices regarding their natural resources, Dedina and Nichols enlist their help for specialized tasks. Local fisherman helm the boat when the team goes out to sea to monitor turtles. Citizens staff research teams, and school children muster awareness and support through poster campaigns. Fisherman who used to poach turtles now work side-by-side with Dedina and Nichols to ensure their children and grandchildren will get to see sea turtles. That's one milestone, but there are other challenges.

Sadly, religious holidays, especially Easter Week, are some of the deadliest times for our world's sea turtles. Since the Catholic church urges its members to refrain from eating meat during this period, many communities substitute eating turtle, incorrectly assuming that since sea turtles live in the ocean they are fish. In fact, sea turtles are reptiles and their meat is red.

WILD COAST reports that the black market turtle trade poses "the biggest threat to the sea turtle population." Research estimates that approximately 35,000 sea turtles are eaten annually in the Californias (California, Baja California and Baja California Sur) alone.

The bi-national Grupo Tortuguero de las Californias (Sea Turtle Conservation Network of the Californias), WILD COAST, and the Grupo de los Cien (Group of 100) have inaugurated a massive public awareness campaign targeting the main sea turtle markets to stop the consumption of sea turtle during Lent and Easter Week. They are also petitioning the Pope to clarify that sea turtles are a meat and not fish and therefore, should not be eaten as a substitute during holidays.

Interestingly enough, the group has found that edu-

cating children about the issue has been very effective; many times it is a child's plea not to sacrifice sea turtles for the sake of a misunderstood holiday meal that keeps turtle in the ocean and off the table.

However, just keeping turtles in the ocean does not translate to their safety. Overfishing is rampant and habitats are threatened.

WILD COAST is also working to preserve the environments of endangered marine species, now focusing on 1.2 million acres of coastal wildlands in the Californias.

*Please see **Sea Turtles**, page 19*



Photo credit: Emily English, WILD COAST, international conservation team

## How You Can Help Our World's Sea Turtles

Many of these organizations working to save sea turtles operate on a shoe-string budget. To learn more about sea turtles, letter-writing campaigns and donation opportunities, please feel free to contact them.

For information on WILD COAST, and the campaign petitioning the Vatican to save sea turtles please visit: [www.wildcoast.net](http://www.wildcoast.net) or call (619) 423-8530.

For more information on The Caretta Research Project please email: [Caretta05@aol.com](mailto:Caretta05@aol.com)

For information on how to help save Baja California from the proposed Nautical Ladder (Escalera Nautica) contact: [www.propenninsula.org/letters](http://www.propenninsula.org/letters)

## Book Bag



By Lisa Gallo  
Administrative Assistant, DDAL

### ***Star in the Storm***

Set in a small, Newfoundland fishing village during 1912, *Star in the Storm* by Joan Hiatt Harlow, gives us a glimpse into the happy lives of 12-year-old Maggie, her family, and her dog Sirius, a loveable, intelligent Newfoundland who is able to swim in the icy coastal waters. When reports of local dogs killing sheep causes the town government to adopt a new law

prohibiting non-sheep herding dogs, Maggie's happy existence is threatened. And when a neighbor's child falsely accuses Sirius of killing one of their sheep, Maggie decides to hide her beloved friend rather than risk

losing him. But can she keep her secret when a shipwreck off the coast threatens hundreds of lives and Sirius can help save them? *Star in the Storm* is a fictional story of drama



and suspense that highlights a family's devotion to a dog who is definitely part of the family. Ages 9-12.

### ***Star in the Storm* (2000)**

**Joan Hiatt Harlow**  
**Aladdin Paperbacks**  
**(an imprint of Simon & Schuster)**  
**1230 Avenue of the Americas**  
**New York, NY 10020**  
**150 pages: \$4.99**

### ***The Great Kapok Tree***

*The Great Kapok Tree*, by Lynne Cherry, has become a classic since it was first published in 1990. This beautifully illustrated picture book tells the tale of a man in the Amazon rainforest who begins to chop down a kapok tree.

When he becomes exhausted and lies down to rest, several animals of the rainforest speak to him and explain how cutting down the kapok trees will destroy their habitat. *The Great Kapok Tree* teaches both children and adults the importance of protecting our wildlife and natural resources. It is a must read for humane and environmental educators. Ages 5-8.

### ***The Great Kapok Tree* (1990)**

**Lynn Cherry**  
**Voyager Books Harcourt, Inc.**  
**6277 Sea Harbor Dr.**  
**Orlando, FL 32887**  
**39 pages: \$7.00**



Courtesy Harcourt, Inc.

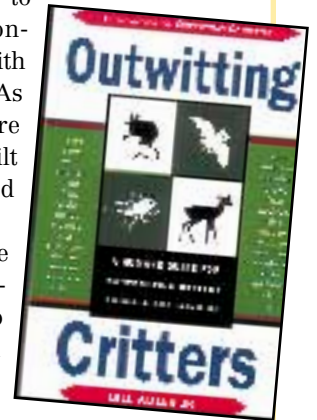
### ***Outwitting Critters***

*Outwitting Critters* by Bill Adler, Jr., is a helpful, practical guide on how to handle confrontations with wildlife. As more and more homes are built in rural and suburban areas, wildlife habitats continue to shrink, and the animals must adapt

to changes in their environment. Interaction with some type of wildlife is inevitable, no matter where you live. From squirrels in your birdfeeder, to deer eating your azaleas, and moles and gophers digging holes in your yard, *Outwitting Critters* provides humane solutions to wildlife conflict so we can enjoy our contact with nature without harming the animals. And most importantly, it reminds us that we're the visitors moving into their territory and that we should treat them with respect and compassion.

### ***Outwitting Critters* (1997)**

**Bill Adler, Jr.**  
**The Lyons Press**  
**246 Goose Lane**  
**P.O. Box 480**  
**Guilford, CT 06437**  
**256 pages: \$14.95**



### ***Sea Turtles*, continued from page 11**

The group has joined with Pro Peninsula and the Grupo de Los Cien to call for a halt in the development of the Escalera Náutica ("Nautical Ladder"), a tourism development project in which the Mexican government plans to create a network of 22 ports in an effort to lure big yachts, and therefore tourists, to the

area. The environmental groups have partnered to educate the communities and politicians on how the proposed development will endanger the livelihood of fishermen and marine life, and irreversibly damage key turtle habitats, as well as gray whale nurseries and biosphere reserves.

The fortunate people who have encountered a sea turtle in the wild, say that once you have the experi-

ence, your life is never the same. It's true. The situation for our turtles is dire; but there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon, thanks to groups like The Caretta Research Project and WILDCOAST, which are working to save our sea turtles one turtle, and person, at a time.

Allison Ravenscroft is on the staff of the DDAL's Los Angeles-based public affairs company and is a volunteer for environmental groups. 🐾