

Sea Turtles and SAEF

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In the Summer of 2016 I received a SAEF grant to visit Ostional Wildlife Refuge in Costa Rica to volunteer on the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle project. I lived and worked in the small village of Ostional, where the monthly harvest of sea turtle eggs and the tourism that results from the nesting events called arribadas are essentially the only form of livelihood for members of the community.

As a volunteer I learned about how the Olive Ridley sea turtles nest, the factors that put them at risk, and the ways that the refuge's projects controls human obstruction. I was lucky enough to witness a sea turtle arribada, the monthly nesting event in which thousands of turtles emerge onto the beach over the course of 3 nights. The events are an extraordinary phenomenon of



nature, as are the sea turtles themselves. Being among the turtles as they emerged, at night, out of the dark water taught me extreme respect for the incredible things that happen outside of human life and man-made events. The sea turtle arribada on Ostional Beach is a perfect example of the places where humans meet the wild face to face. As a powerful species, we are constantly challenged to make decisions about what to do when we meet with the wild. Ostional helped me understand how to create environments that are healthy and productive for both humans and animals.

I learned to work with the sea turtles, measuring them, counting eggs as they are laid, observing damage or obscurities, and collecting data. We worked mostly at night when the turtles came to the beach. During the day I participated in beach clean-up, work with the hatchery, and nest density work, which included removing old, dead nests.

The village was incredibly different from anywhere I have ever lived or visited.

It was established as a community dependent on sea turtle eggs long before the area was protected. It is one of only a few nesting beaches where humans are present, and most of the people who live there come from a long line of relatives who also live there. The closest city, and by "city", I mean paved road, is about a 2 hour bus ride away. I stayed with a widowed older woman who had 3 daughters, 2 of whom had moved to that city, Santa Cruz, and one of whom remained in Ostional with 3 children of her own. Most people spoke only Spanish, and I was challenged to learn and significantly improve my Spanish. My cultural awareness and ability to think beyond the expectations of my own culture were most developed through this experience.

I would like to thanks the Saint Anthony Educational Foundation for funding this visit. The experience had a profound impact on the way I think about human interaction with nature, and visiting Costa Rica allowed me to see how another country is pursuing its sustainability goals.

