

Turning the turtle

The patrol team was searching for the scene of the crime when it stumbled on a different but more welcome problem.



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THE DAY STARTED abruptly. At 3am, the sounds of the rainforest were drowned out by the raised voices of the night team returning from their four-hour beach patrol of Playa Norte, where they had been monitoring nesting green turtles. I rolled out of bed to discover what all the fuss was about, and was dismayed to learn that the team had found evidence of poachers taking nesting turtles from the beach, an illegal activity we call 'turtle lifting'.

Sadly, this had become all too common in recent months. Under the cover of darkness, poachers flip a turtle over onto its shell and use ropes to drag it to a boat or into the bushes, where they dispatch the unfortunate creature and carve up its meat. On several occasions, patrols had found the sad, bloodied remains of green turtles in the

dense vegetation bordering the coast.

Horrified to hear that there had been another incident, I spent the rest of the night reflecting on what had become a serious problem. Our teams were patrolling the beach for more than 12 hours a day, and we were engaging the local community at several levels. But due to the long-standing Caribbean tradition of eating turtle meat and the poor standard of living, the poaching was continuing unchecked. I was feeling more and more helpless as each day went by.

The turtle's ordeal was not over yet – how were we going to move it to a location where it could make its own way to the sea?

Anxious to clarify what had happened the night before, I got my team up well before sunrise and we headed for the beach. As the sun began to soar, we found and followed the

drag marks that led from the beach onto a path running parallel to the sand, and ended in a patch of disturbed vegetation.

As I inched closer, I mentally prepared myself to find yet another empty carapace and some bloody remains. But I was in for a pleasant surprise – the turtle had been flipped upside down and tied to a bush with a thick

Evolution has made turtles highly capable of navigating their way back to their nesting beaches year after year, but less hot at righting themselves on land.



rope, but she was still very much alive. The team was ecstatic – we'd never found a turtle captured alive before.

The ancient reptile's ordeal was not over yet, however. How were we going to move the 150kg giant to a location from which she could make her own way to the sea? We needed more manpower, so I called up some reserves on my radio. Twenty minutes later, we were joined by extra staff and volunteers and, with their help, we carried the turtle to the beach. Even after a night of inverted incapacity, she quickly started making her way down to the sea.

But the night's events had left their mark. As we watched the turtle's progress, we noticed that her shell was heavily scratched and battered. The centre of her carapace had lost its usual dark grey colouration and now sported a whitish circle – the result of being dragged over a long distance.

One of the most fascinating characteristics of green turtles is the way they return, season after season, to the beach where they hatched. But after this female's brush with death, it was anyone's guess if she would risk another nesting attempt here.

ABOUT A MONTH later, while patrolling Playa Norte, I came upon a nesting green turtle. When she had finished laying her eggs, I began attaching metal tags to her flippers. The tags contain unique identification numbers that enable researchers to identify individual turtles season after season.

But as soon as I applied the first tag, she abandoned all attempts to disguise her nest with sand and made a 'run' for the sea (as much as a green turtle can). As she fled, a colleague pointed out the strange mark on her shell, which was distinguishable even at night due to its light colouration.

It was her – I had no doubt. Despite everything she had endured, the 'unlifted' turtle had remained faithful to her nesting beach and her instincts and had come home.

The rescued turtle made a dash for the sea, but nobody knew whether she would ever return to the nesting beach.

