

The Next Wave Arrives



As we start the downhill portion of our evening hike into Jack and Isaac Bays Preserve on St. Croix, Kemit-Amon Lewis asks me to flick a switch on my headlamp. Its bright white LED light becomes a dull red glow. He assures me the turtles can't see the colored light, which makes sense because I can barely see it. I stumble down the trail to the beach, where we turn everything off. Other red flashlights are turning on and off farther up the beach, and I wonder who else is here with us.

As my eyes adjust to the dark, I see lumpy shapes at the waterline, like boulders pulling themselves out of the surf. Sea turtles. Lewis taps my shoulder and whispers with excitement, "You're going to see some egg laying tonight."

An island native who attended college in Georgia, Lewis serves as the Conservancy's Caribbean coral conservation manager. He wears his passion for sea turtles proudly and literally: four tattoos of the animals climb up his right leg.

Sea turtles may be graceful and fast in the water, but they move awkwardly on land. It takes probably 45 minutes for a female measuring 3 or 4 feet long to drag herself up the beach and dig a nest. She will retreat to the water if she sees us. "Once a turtle starts laying her eggs, she enters a trance," says Lewis. "Only then can she be approached by people."

As we walk, Lewis tells me about the dramatic turnaround for green and hawksbill sea turtles at this Conservancy preserve. When monitoring began in 1994, only 14 nesting sea turtles were found for the season, despite excellent habitat and beach conditions.

Lewis admits that some of the obstacles to sea turtle conservation are widespread and daunting: deep-sea fishing gear, water pollution, ocean litter and climate change. "But

sometimes," he says, a grin spreading across his face, "the solution can be much simpler." Research showed that non-native mongooses and poachers were plundering turtle nests at this bay. The Conservancy removed the mongooses with live traps, but poaching was a social problem that required a different approach.

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Cover-Up:
A female green sea turtle disguises her nest of eggs by flinging sand.

Farther down the beach, we meet the front line of turtle defense: volunteers who spend every evening on the beach, from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m.

Each year, Lewis recruits volunteers from around the United States who spend three-month stints collecting data on the turtles, and at the

same time deterring poachers by their very presence. The result: This year, some 250 green and hawksbill turtles nested at Jack and Isaac beach. "Poaching is nonexistent," says Lewis. "It is no longer an issue here."

We join a couple of volunteers as they approach a laying female. Lewis signals, and I creep closer to this massive and amazing turtle. It breathes slowly and heavily as it deposits dozens of eggs into a hole in the sand. They look like Ping-Pong balls. A volunteer quietly documents the location of the nest as well as the turtle's health and measurements.

It's hard to believe that at one point a nest like this would have been in peril. So often, saving something requires tough choices, complex solutions and multifaceted approaches. But sometimes, it just requires being there. It requires sitting with a turtle on a beach.



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