

# EDUCATION CAN STOP THE TEARS

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The isolated black sand beaches of Allardyce on the island of Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands are a thing of beauty; for me, a sanctuary - a tranquil place to relax, read a book, or just sit and contemplate while being hypnotized by the metronome of the waves crashing on the reefs. It is not, however, a place special only to me. From late October through January, Leatherback sea turtles make this their nesting ground. During these months the turtles put their flippers back onto dry land and crawl ashore to lay their eggs. Though against the rules, students and teachers alike sneak off to the beach and steal turtle eggs. Apparently they taste pretty good. I've tried again and again to explain why taking *all* of the turtles' eggs is bad. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the many empty nests I've found, my message hasn't gotten through. Nevertheless, I set out one warm November night to witness this miracle of nature for myself.

I asked three students to accompany me. They arrived at my house around half past ten, and we headed off on the kilometer-long trek through the jungle to the beach. Upon arriving at the beach we turned off all of our lights, quietly moving ahead under a moonless sky. There was lightning off in the distance. The boys told me that the turtles liked that, and that we had a good chance of seeing one. It was at that moment that I saw tracks. It looked as though a tractor had come out of the sea and onto the beach. My eyes followed the tracks until they met the object of their making: 'Babaru' (Leatherback sea turtle in local language). It was beautiful! I quickly illuminated it with my headlamp and got in close to take photos. The turtle got scared. It turned around and headed back to its saline home as fast as its flippers could carry its massive bulk. It was then that six boys came out from their hiding place in the jungle. They were disappointed, watching their prize crawl away.

We walked on; the others stayed behind, sulking. We hadn't gone more than 400 meters when someone lit a match on the beach ahead of us. That, I learned, was a signal to be quiet - there was a turtle on the beach ahead. We crept to the spot and found it deserted except for a large turtle, still in the surf. In the ten full minutes that it took this behemoth to crawl the 15 meters from the surf to the edge of the bush, my students taught me a little about the behavior of these beautiful animals.

If a turtle is still on the move, it will retreat to the sea if frightened. But, if she's already stopped and digging a nest, you can approach and the turtle will go about her business as if you weren't even there. Being an amateur I had frightened the first turtle away, immediately snapping photos in my naïve excitement. This time I waited. I wanted to witness the entire egg laying ritual, even though I knew the destiny of the eggs. We silently waited as powerful front flippers pitched sand left and right. When the turtle was well dug in, another teacher emerged from the bush with a gang of ten. I hurried to get a ringside seat. The turtle dug a bowl shaped depression with its front flippers. It then half crawled out so that its hind flippers were in the center of the depression. Using its hind flippers, it then expertly and delicately dug a deep hole. The excavation was very efficient. When the hole was finished one of the hind flippers was removed, the other remaining to gently guide the eggs into their perfectly sculpted home. It was a

fascinating sight performed by a truly magnificent creature; but to me, the whole experience was tainted.

This adult turtle may return, but the ability to pass on her genes would be denied this night; systematically destroyed the moment she brought her miracle to light. She was clever. She buried the eggs then moved a few feet away and dug another depression. She repeated this charade. She crawled about kicking up as much sand as possible. The camouflage was very good, depressions and tracks everywhere. The problem was that there was a predator there the whole time, watching and waiting. She knew it too.

When I scared the first turtle back to the sea, one of the boys mentioned the Leatherback's tears. He said that she was sad because she didn't get to lay her eggs. I told him that they were tears of joy because I had saved her eggs from certain demise. The tears I saw on the second turtle were undoubtedly tears of sorrow. It was awful. She was slower on her return to the water as if grief slowed her pace. As soon as she'd reached the safety of the sea, I left. I had no desire to watch the hungry pack squabble over the right to rob this wonderful creature of her destiny. I said 'good night' and did a condensed version of my lessons on conservation. That's all I could do. I can't force anyone to stop stealing *all* of the turtle eggs, and wouldn't if I could. I can only try to educate them.

As I walked back along the beach, I came to the place where I'd seen my first Leatherback sea turtle. There were fresh tracks. She was back! Unfortunately, so were the boys waiting in ambush. I again gave my best conservation plea. I tried my best to educate them, and will keep on trying. It was disheartening to know that my words were falling on ears as deaf as the last. I didn't wait for the violation of her nest. I didn't want to see her tears.

Six Months Later...

During our school's Easter break I was lucky enough to take eight of my students from Allardyce Provincial Secondary School on a five-day field trip to the Arnavon Marine Conservation Area (AMCA). The AMCA was primarily developed to protect a nesting site of Hawksbill sea turtles, but in the years since its official declaration, all native flora and fauna, both terrestrial and marine, has been protected. My students and I were greeted by three Conservation Officers (COs). This being a school trip, we were given a presentation every morning by Dixon, one of the Conservation Officers. The afternoons were a practical of sorts – going to all of the islands, snorkeling, and just observing the COs at work. Our evenings were free, and our first evening produced the most memorable experience of the trip.

Most of us were relaxing on the beach, but one student, Samuel, followed Dixon to help with the evening monitoring. Suddenly Samuel came running up to us and panted "Sapos iu laek lukim bebi totele, iumi mas go kwiktaem" (If you want to see baby turtles, we must go quickly). We found the CO kneeling over a small wooden frame swarming with tiny, brown turtles. The turtles were released one by one in order to get an accurate count. Ninety-five baby Hawksbill turtles made a mad dash to the sea as fast as their little flippers could carry them. The advancing turtles were stopped by nothing; going over, under, around, or in-between any obstacles in their path. I placed two turtles on the backside of their nest, facing in-land. Without hesitation they turned 180° and scrambled to the sea. They just know. It was almost spiritual watching these tiny creatures begin that immense journey that their lives will be. Unfortunately for them, that journey is full of peril. We spotted the fins of two black-tip reef sharks patrolling back and forth just outside of the breaking surf. The students wanted to know what they could do to help the

defenseless turtles. Dixon provided an almost prophetic response, and in one sentence summed what I'd been teaching for the past 16 months: "Nature can take care of itself, only man will spoil it."

My students and I arrived back at Allardyce in time to help prepare for the school's Easter feast. To get fish for the feast, a group of boys took canoes and went spear fishing. Mark, one of the boys who had visited the AMCA, went with them. Upon their return Mark noticed the boys in one of the other canoes unload two turtles; one juvenile, one adult. They put the turtles ashore on their backs so that they couldn't escape. Mark walked directly to the small turtle and righted it, allowing it to slip into the river and return to the sea. To the others' questioning looks he responded "That turtle is too small. It hasn't even had time to reproduce." The combination of classroom lessons and hands-on experience had made an impression. Education can stop the tears.