

Episode 22a: Turtles in Panama (Part 1)

Summary

In the first of a two-part episode, Nick and Wendy talk about volunteering at a turtle conservation project in Panama and seeing a mother sea turtle come up to the beach in the middle of the night to lay her eggs.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about another one of the great animal experiences that we've had during our travels. And it was the time that we spent a few days volunteering at a turtle conservation project in Panama.

Wendy: Yes, and it was a great experience, one that has really stuck with me.

Nick: Right, so it was quite a few years ago now but we still remember the details quite well. Umm, and so it was in an archipelago on the Atlantic ... off the Atlantic coast of Panama, and basically there was a conservation project where, uhh, people who were travelling in the region like we were could go there, spend a few days and you would pay for accommodation and food, and, so that was the financial contribution that you were giving to the project and then in return they would, umm, teach you what they were doing and then you would be able to go and participate in the work that they were doing.

Wendy: Umm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, there are lots of, you know, opportunities to volunteer and nowadays that's become a really popular thing for travellers to do, umm, 'voluntouring' it's sometimes called. It's this combination of volunteering and tourism. And some of them can be good and some of them can be not so good, but I thought this was really well run and, you know, it's true that they probably needed our money more than they needed our actual help. Uhh, I mean, we did help, which, you know, we can talk a little bit about what we did, you know. We did, uhh, help them in their work with this conservation of the turtles. But, you know, given the time that they had to spend teaching us what to do when we were there for just a few days, that probably wasn't all that helpful for them but it was a wonderful experience for us to be up close and personal¹ with the turtles. And then we also, you know, contributed money, umm, which helped to keep the project going, so I thought it was a great system, really.

¹ up close and personal (fixed expression): very close, closer than you usually get

Nick: Yeah I think in this case it was a win-win. I mean, they got funds² that they ... or some funds that they really needed and we got a great experience out of it. It was very much a grassroots or quite a basic, umm, project, or certainly the facilities were very basic.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah they were. I remember the shower was just like an outdoor, uhh, cubicle with a bucket, basically. You would just pour a bucket of water over your head. Umm, and, yeah, you had to be willing to rough it³, you know, to be used to camping and we weren't camping, we were actually living in an actual building with a bed, umm, but it was very basic accommodation like you said. And the one thing that I really remember having difficulties with was there was this type of bug that lived in the sand, like a sand flea, and it would bite me, umm, every time I stepped into the sand and so I had these bites all over me and that was a bit hard to deal with. So yeah, you have to be willing to deal with some, you know, uncomfot ... discomfort.

Nick: And so basically the place where we stayed and the actual headquarters of the project are at one end of this very long beach. The beach is about six kilometres long. And most of the work of the project is doing these patrols every night up and down the beach. And they have do this in a series of shifts, and so if there are volunteers like us at the time, we can join one of those shifts and that's how it works. And so on our first night we woke up at one o'clock in the morning, and then there was a biologist named Viktor who was in charge of the shift and so the three of us - the two of us and Viktor - went, uhh, up and down the beach. And so because you're walking in sand and because you can't see anything, you're not walking as quickly as you otherwise would, and so it takes about two hours to go all the way to one end and about two hours to come back. And so you're doing this for four hours in the middle of the night. And then there are other shifts that - or, at least one other shift - that left earlier in the night so that you have the whole night covered.

And the purpose of this is to monitor the turtles that are coming to lay their eggs and to protect them and their eggs from poachers⁴ who are in that vicinity and they're also looking out for this and trying to, essentially, take the eggs, and also to even kill the adult turtles in some cases. And at this particular project they had done quite well and they were quite proud of the work that they'd been doing, that there hadn't been very many at all - or in fact none at all until just before we got there - umm, reportings (reports) of poaching on their beach.

² funds: money to be used for a project

³ rough it: to live or travel in a basic, non-luxurious way

⁴ poachers: people who kill, capture or otherwise profit from wild animals

And so on that first night we walked all the way up to the end of the beach, so it took us about two hours, uhh, and we did see the tracks of a turtle that had come up for the previous, or during the previous shift, so we'd missed it. The turtle had already laid her eggs and had gone back, uhh, into the ocean, and so we thought, "Oh, maybe we won't get one tonight then," because it was quite rare, I think, to have two in one night. So then we walked all the way to the end and all the way back, and when we were nearly back where we had started, umm, we saw a mother turtle, a leatherback turtle which is the largest of the eight types of marine turtles, that had come up to lay her eggs. And so it's really quite amazing because the turtles have these flippers⁵ which they use to swim in the ocean and that's the main purpose of their flippers. But they also have to use their flippers when they're on sand to move, but it's very, uhh, awkward, it's kind of very uncoordinated, and so they make these huge, enormous marks in the sand, uhh, and it's quite interesting to see them move using, uhh, limbs that aren't really suited for that and are far more suited to swimming.

Wendy: Right, yeah, I mean people might be more familiar with a river turtle, for example, uhh, which does ... those types of turtles do actually have legs, they have four legs, so they can walk. Now they walk very very slowly and they still look a little bit clumsy⁶ on land, but, you know, they can actually walk around on the land and also swim very well in the water whereas sea turtles, they spend almost all of their life in the sea, swimming, and really the only time that they come up onto the beach is to lay their eggs. So their bodies really are not built to walk on land and, uhh, it's very difficult for them.

Nick: And so it was quite interesting that Viktor was telling us that you can tell, that *he* can tell, which kind of species of turtle it is, simply by looking at the tracks because different turtles use their flippers in different ways to, kind of, waddle⁷ up the beach. And so for example the leatherback turtle, umm, uses both flippers at the same time but other types of turtles ... the hawksbill, I think uses one flipper at one time and then the other flipper, and so then that creates a distinct track.

And so we arrived just in time to see the turtle digging the hole so that she could lay her eggs. Umm, and actually there was a problem though because on the sand there was a lot of driftwood, umm, which is wood that has come up from the ocean and the tides⁸ bring it up onto the sand. And so right where the spot where the turtle had chosen was not a particularly good one because there was a lot of wood or there was at least one piece of wood in the way that was making it difficult for her to

⁵ flippers: limbs that some sea animals have to help them swim; humans wear artificial flippers on their feet when SCUBA diving, for example

⁶ clumsy: uncoordinated, physically awkward

⁷ waddle: to move with short steps, rocking from side to side, like a duck

⁸ tides: the rising and falling of sea water caused by the moon and sun

lay her eggs, or to dig a hole to lay her eggs comfortably. And so there was a possibility that she might have given up and gone back and tried a different place elsewhere on the beach later that night. Uhh, but it turned out that she was able to lay the eggs and she laid quite a lot, I think.

Wendy: Yeah, 90-something. Ninety-five or something like that.

Nick: And so sometimes they'd come out two at a time and we could see even though it was dark. We were right up close to it and we could just see them coming out into this hole that she had dug, uhh, and so it was really amazing to see it.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah and she goes into kind of a trance⁹, so she wasn't bothered by the fact that we were there. I think she was probably not even aware, really, that we were there. Umm, we had to be very careful not to disturb her in the time when she was crawling up the beach, but she once she actually starts laying the eggs, then she wasn't bothered because, like I said, she's in this trance and, uhh, she's, you know, doing something very instinctual for her. So we were actually taking the eggs out because we needed to, uhh, move them to a safer location because the poachers would be able to see exactly where they ... where the eggs were because, you know, she makes these tracks, like we said, on the beach, and it's very obvious. So we wanted to move them. Part of our job was to move them, umm, to the hatchery where they could hatch¹⁰ safely. Uhh, so we were actually ... you know, she had already dug this hole and she was dropping the eggs in and we were taking them out almost as quickly as she was dropping them in. Uhh, but she was unaware of that, uhh, and she probably would have been very angry at us if she had been aware, but we were doing it to save her babies.

Nick: OK, so it turns out that this is going for quite a while, so we're going to, uhh, stop it here but we'll have another episode where we continue the rest of this story, including talking about seeing baby turtles.

Wendy: Yes, which was definitely a highlight of the experience.

⁹ trance: a half-conscious state where you aren't aware of what's happening around you

¹⁰ (to) hatch: when an egg cracks and the baby comes out of it (e.g. turtle, chicken)

Comprehension Questions

1. What was the accommodation like at the conservation centre?
2. Why did the turtle have trouble laying her eggs?
3. What did Nick and Wendy do with the eggs? Why?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. "Sorry I dropped your plate. I'm so _____."
2. In Africa, _____ kill elephants for their ivory tusks.
3. Usually we stay in 5-star hotels but for our next holiday we're going _____ by going camping.
4. The monastery of Mont Saint Michel on the coast of Normandy, France, is sometimes connected to the mainland and sometimes not, depending on the _____.
5. People in the Muslim sect of whirling dervishes often put themselves into a _____ by spinning around and around for a long time.
6. She's eight-and-a-half months pregnant, so when she moves it's more a _____ than a walk.
7. Yesterday we went snorkelling but I forgot to bring my _____.
8. The concert last night was amazing! Afterwards I got to go backstage and get _____ with all the members of the band!
9. A popular English expression is: *Don't count your chickens before they _____*. It means not to think too far ahead.
10. We're starting a new non-profit organisation. We have a lot of great ideas but the problem is that at the moment we don't have any _____.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever seen a sea turtle? If so, what was the experience like?
2. Would you like to volunteer at a place like this? Why or why not?
3. Do you like to 'rough it' while travelling or do you prefer more comfortable and/or luxurious accommodation?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Nick and Wendy described the accommodation as basic.
2. The turtle had trouble because there was some wood in her way while she was digging the hole to lay her eggs.
3. They removed the eggs from the nest and reburied them elsewhere to protect them from poachers.

Exercises

1. clumsy
2. poachers
3. to rough it
4. tides
5. trance
6. waddle
7. flippers
8. up close and personal
9. hatch
10. funds