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Blue Ocean Writings
Diary

Carl Safina's voyages around the world have brought him face-to-face with giant, car-sized Leatherback turtles, hundreds of thousands of nesting albatrosses, and pods of dolphins facing death from tuna fishing. Scroll below to read some of his diary entries:

To Save the Last Dinosaur

Everything about Sandy Lanham is sheer reassurance. And now's a good time for reassurance, because during the next week and a half we'll be flying thousands of miles over ocean and wild dune in her little single-engine four-seater Cessna 182—a plane 47 years old.

Surveying sea turtle nests along the Pacific coast of Mexico, from southern Baja to the Guatemala border, will take us about ten days. This is no 600-mile-an-hour airliner with drink carts in the aisles and a movie. Counting turtle tracks from the air is so visually fatiguing you can work only a few hours a day. (Not to mention, there's no toilet and you can't get out of your seat.) Further limiting the hours we can fly each day is that the airports are not optimally spaced and we can't fly after sundown. And we have to follow each nook and cranny in the serpentine coastline, so the mileage will really add up; that will also slow us. But Sandy sees no limitations; she would change nothing.

She's saying, "The best kind of flying is the kind I do—low and slow. People are always telling me things I could do to make my plane faster, and I'm like, 'Why?'" Sandy is informal, a little mischievous, a tall, trim woman in her mid-50s, with longish brown hair and a fear of public speaking. "I can tell you this: It's not about flying, and it's not about airplanes. It's about seeing things. Once I get comfortable, the control panel disappears, the windshield disappears, and I'm just out there, seeing."

I'm not concerned about our speed, and I'm a true believer in our mission, but I'm stuck on the plane's date of birth. The plane looks, well, used, wearing parts of its original yellow and brown paint job like a faded bumblebee—that insect that famously defies aerodynamic theory predicting it could not get airborne. Sandy assures me, "No Cessna 182 has ever had a mid-air structural failure—no wings snapping off, for instance." That's reassuring, for instance.

"And when the engine fails the plane will keep gliding until I can bring it safely to rest on a road or beach."

“When?” I choose to find that reassuring, though. Also reassuring is that, although she flies for a living, she’s flight-prepping like she first soloed last week, from the way she checked the oil to the affectionate way she’s stroking the propeller blade. “Anyway, the engine is new, and—you’ll be happy to know—it has just enough hours on it to trust it.”

One thing about this trip that Sandy would change is the number of turtles we’re expecting. Last year was the worst ever for Pacific Leatherbacks, the now-critically endangered sea turtles we’ll focus on. Sandy says, “The type of flying I least like is where I’m acting as historian of what was, where numbers are so low they seem hopeless, like for the Vaquita and desert Pronghorn—and maybe soon the Leatherback.”

Vaquitas are small porpoises living in the upper Gulf of California. They’re having a near-death experience because of fishermen’s gill nets. Pronghorns are swift and graceful antelope-like animals unique to North America, and nearly gone from the Sonoran desert. And Leatherbacks—Leatherbacks are giant ocean turtles. Turtles, but they seem more like dinosaurs on the way to becoming mammals. Dinosaurs because of their surreal size; imagine an 800-pound turtle and you’ve just envisioned merely an average female Leatherback. Mammals because their evolution—migrating the longest distances to the coldest waters sea turtles reach—has given them a growth strategy and warm-blooded abilities that don’t usually go with the word “reptile.”

You don’t “see” your first Leatherback Turtle, you experience it. And if you’re going to experience it, I advise haste. Leatherbacks ply the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. And while their Atlantic numbers are generally believed at least stable, and in some places increasing, they have crashed in parts of the Indian and especially the Pacific. With a decline of 95 percent in the last 20 years, some people believe our world’s largest turtle is doomed to imminent extinction throughout our world’s largest ocean.

Our job is to prevent that from happening. And of course, each of us will play only a fractional role in that effort. Yet we will apply ourselves to the task, enormous, appalling as it is. Sandy will fly the plane that will carry Laura Sarti, the Mexican scientist who has devoted her life to understanding and protecting the Leatherback when it nests on Mexican shores. I will bear witness. Others, in other countries, will play other roles. Some, with much difficulty, will endeavor to educate local people about the critical necessity of letting the great turtles’ eggs hatch rather than taking them for food. Some will struggle to buy and protect nesting beaches, courting funders and buying out resentful land speculators. Others will tell fisherman that how they make their living must change if it is to survive at all. Some will track the turtles with satellites, astonishing even themselves with new revelations of the Leatherback’s trans-oceanic travel. Connecting South America to Europe, Papua to Monterey Bay, Leatherbacks are just now telling us that, since the time hungry dinosaurs were a nesting sea turtle's worst problem, it’s been a small world, after all. Their mute plea, as they attempt to carry on as always, is that we will understand in urgent time the intimate connections of this water-bound world.

Beyond doubt, the Pacific Leatherback is in trouble. But doomed? Some animals in worse shape—even some sea turtle populations—have been rescued in the last decades by intensive intervention. The giant

Pacific Leatherback poses a giant challenge, though, because to be saved anywhere it must be saved everywhere. Saving this awesome beast in the Pacific Ocean requires cooperation from industrial fishing captains who invisibly kill them in their nets and lines, impoverished people who visualize in a nesting turtle only eggs and meat, and politicians who must see in their turtle nesting beaches national pride and moral responsibility.

The main note of urgency is that Malaysia's nesting Leatherback population, once the single densest Leatherback rookery in the world has, in just the last couple of years, utterly vanished. Gone. It can happen.

This challenge daunts. The scale of solution miniaturizes the efforts of any person. But it creates a need of unmatched sanctity—the call to save the living. The problem has been created by individuals working separately, and the solution—if it comes—will come from individuals, working together. And any opportunity to help is a small chance to do something really worthwhile while we breathe.

That brings us together here. Though the trend has been downward with breathtaking speed, every three to four years Leatherbacks have a "good year," with many more females nesting. Word is that this year, because of cooler water temperatures, more of the remaining Leatherbacks are coming ashore to nest. This is a "good" year. How "good" it is, we shall see.