

THE ENDLESS CIRCLE OF THE ILLEGAL EGGS HARVEST: AWARENESS A POTENTIAL SOLUTION.

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Although illegal at present, in Costa Rica the harvest and consumption of marine turtle eggs has been a tradition documented for over a century in sustainable and unsustainable ways. The pressure of egg harvest has been one of the main reasons for the decline of marine turtle nesting populations, as is the case of the Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) at National Park Marino las Baulas in Playa Grande. In order to reduce the pressure of the illegal egg extraction in Costa Rican nesting beaches, in 1987 a controlled harvest of eggs was legalized in Ostional Wildlife Refuge, an Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) arribada rookery. Ostional eggs are sold in national markets, providing a legal source of eggs and income for the local community. Nevertheless, illegal egg harvest still occurs throughout the country. In the Southern Nicoya Peninsula, egg poaching led to the establishment of a marine turtle monitoring program in the late 1990s. At present, the Rescue Center for Endangered Marine Species (CREMA by its Spanish acronym) monitors four nesting beaches; where awareness, outreach, education and monitoring of female nesting turtle populations over the last two decades have been the key to reduce the illegal harvest in these communities. Nonetheless, this threat is still present and there is not enough police enforcement to address the issue. Playa Corozalito, an arribada beach (one of the beaches where CREMA is present), poaching is a constant pressure; this place is monitored with the support of the RIESTER Foundation, a non-profit organization created by RIESTER, a prestigious advertising and digital marketing agency in the United States. Considering this situation, CREMA and RIESTER Foundation started an anti-poaching campaign in order to create awareness and reduce the illegal harvest and consumption of marine turtle eggs. This campaign will send a simple, clear and strong message showing an image of a human stomach with a hatchling inside and slogans such as “*They don’t travel the world to end up here*” and “*Each egg counts.*” The campaign, designed in English and Spanish, will be shared through social media (Instagram, Facebook and CREMA website), and 250 pamphlets and posters will be distributed in local communities and Costa Rican NGOs. The Sea Turtle Symposium is

the perfect platform to share this campaign with international conservation projects that are facing this threat. Besides the recorded poaching rates on CREMA projects the hashtag #eacheggcounts will be used in social media posts to estimate the extend of the campaign. In Costa Rica and other places worldwide, most nesting conservation projects are located in isolated and rural areas where legal enforcement is scarce or nonexistent. It becomes necessary to take an awareness approach to share information about threatened marine turtles as well as an emotional appeal in order to make an impact reducing poaching activities. Ideally, this campaign will help to reduce the egg poaching pressure not only in Costa Rica but in the different coastal communities in the world.