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Turtles Taking Over as the Kings of the Sea

By JANE MARGOLIES

FORGET swimming with dolphins. The next big thing might just be sea turtles.

These mysterious dinosaur-era creatures -- which can live 80 years, swim thousands of miles from the beaches where they were born, and yet, somehow, manage to return to the same spots to lay their own eggs -- are an increasing object of fascination for many Americans. And the travel industry has taken notice. Tour operators offer turtle-watching expeditions. Hotels brag on their Web sites about the turtles that come onto their beaches, and they promote discounts in nesting season, steer guests to nighttime walks and hatchling releases, not to mention fill gift shops with turtle-emblazoned towels and even serve turtle-shaped desserts.

Natural Habitat, a Boulder, Colo., tour operator that organizes expeditions to see Olive Ridley turtles in southern Mexico, says interest has jumped 30 percent since it began offering the trips five years ago. Nighttime walks along Florida's Atlantic coast, which are conducted by trained guides authorized by the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, attracted 95,415 people over the last 11 years and are booked weeks in advance.

This year, people who wanted to sign up for a walk in the Sebastian Inlet State Park in Melbourne Beach, Fla., in July were advised to mark their calendars for June 15, when the park, a division of the state Department of Environmental Protection, began taking reservations, and to start calling at 8 a.m. Some walks fill up on the first day.

Every little hotel on a nesting beach makes sure to mention turtles on its Web site. "When we redid our Web site two or three years ago, we put that on," said Monica White, owner of the Croton Arms Resort Apartments in Pompano Beach, Fla. "We tell them what's available in our area."

More than \$1.65 million of the \$2 million needed has been raised to build the Georgia Sea Turtle Center, on Jekyll Island, a research, rehabilitation and educational facility to be built in a decommissioned 1903 power plant in the historic district.

At some resorts, turtle tourism ranges from structured offerings (at the Marriott CasaMagna in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, a marine biologist monitors the beach, moves eggs to an on-site nursery and organizes evening hatchling releases) to more laid-back encounters (the owner of 3 Rivers, an environmentally friendly lodge on the island of Dominica in the West Indies, offers to wake up guests and rush them down to the beach in the middle of the night if he gets word that a nesting female has appeared). Some are geared to children (at the Four Seasons Nevis, youngsters learn to make turtles out of paper plates and can take part in a turtle-drawing contest), others to aspiring scientists (guests staying on Little St. Simon Island, a private barrier island off the southeast coast of Georgia, can help excavate nests after eggs have hatched and record data on birth rates).

For some nature lovers, a turtle sighting -- whether the result of a carefully choreographed program or a chance encounter on a beach -- can be the high point of a vacation. "I'm still on cloud nine," said Gigi Alpers, a retired airlines reservations agent from Rego Park, Queens, who came upon a 900-pound leatherback during an early morning walk in Aruba in May. She found the experience more thrilling than spotting leopards, lion cubs and white rhinos on safari in South Africa last year. "When I saw what it took for this huge creature to lay her eggs, then cover them up, then make a false nest, then slowly make her way back to the water, well, I was in awe."

Sea turtles have been swimming in the oceans of the world for more than 100 million years. But over the last couple of centuries their numbers have dwindled because of hunting (turtles are killed for meat, skin and shells; their eggs are eaten and, in some countries, used as aphrodisiacs) and commercial fishing (turtles drown when accidentally caught in trawl nets).

In the 1950's, an American biologist, Archie Carr, began calling attention to the problem. His work tagging and recording data on green turtles in Tortuguero, Costa Rica, which he chronicled in "The Windward Road," published in 1956, led to the founding of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, a leading sea turtle research organization based in Gainesville, Fla. Eventually, all seven of the world's species -- from the Kemp's Ridley, which is about two feet long and weighs no more than 100 pounds, to the leatherback, which can grow to eight feet and more than 2,000 pounds -- were listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Since then, several countries have joined the United States in outlawing hunting and egg collecting, and shrimp fishermen operating in many parts of the world must now use nets with turtle excluder devices, which allow the animals to escape. Small turtle populations in various locations have been stabilized, and some are thriving.

But it's still open season in many lands, and even where hunting and egg gathering are prohibited, beachfront development nibbles

away at turtle nesting and foraging habitats. Community, fishing, religious and environmental groups, including the National Wildlife Federation, have been working to stop a Four Seasons resort from being built on a leatherback nesting spot in what is known as the Northeastern Ecological Corridor, on the north side of Puerto Rico. Elizabeth Pizzinato, a Four Seasons spokeswoman, said, "These issues are being worked out" in the project's development with the help of environmental experts.

Where hotels and houses exist, their lights sometimes lead turtles astray, drawing them inland where they tumble into chlorinated pools or wander onto streets, where they have been hit by cars. Such occurrences have led East Coast beach communities to pass lighting ordinances (and given hoteliers another reason to remind guests to turn out their lights).

Karen Eckert, the executive director of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network, a Duke University nonprofit organization that gathers data collected by scientists in the Caribbean, says that her group is now completing a handbook with guidelines for hotels. Its key recommendations: retrofit lighting, keep beaches clean and clear and reduce foot traffic at night.

Dr. Eckert and others like her want to prevent beaches from being overrun by nighttime turtle seekers, who scare the skittish creatures away. They also want to keep people from climbing on top of turtles, taking flash pictures of the females while they're laying their eggs, handling hatchlings unnecessarily or in any way delaying their entry into the water, where they float for several years, until they are mature enough to mate. Only one in 1,000 hatchlings survives to maturity. "The beach stuff is what we worry about," Dr. Eckert said. "That is the most vulnerable stage. You are walking hundreds of people right into the delivery room."

Still, scientists say that it seems that no harm is done when a trained guide takes a few people to watch a turtle lay her eggs (from the rear, where they're least likely to distract her), or look on as inchlong hatchlings wiggle their way up out of their sandy nest and scabble down the shore.

But, of course, the turtles themselves have to cooperate. Turtle populations nest in different seasons in different places. Nesting females will lay eggs three to five times a season, usually at two-week intervals. But as with other things in nature, there are no guarantees.

So found Martin Lawrence, a neuroscientist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, who was with his wife and three children in St. Martin last spring. The family then flew to Dominica to see turtles. They never did. "Every night we went to bed primed, our clothes ready, so that if a call came in we could just scoot over there," he said. Even though a turtle came onto the beach the night before their arrival and the night after they left, none appeared during their stay. "We were disappointed," he said.

Tracking on Foot and by G.P.S. Transmitter

Here is a sampling of programs for travelers:

WHERE -- Disney's Vero Beach Resort, Vero Beach, Fla., (407) 934-7639; www.disneyworld.com.

WHEN -- June, July, August.

WHAT -- At this vacation-club property two hours southeast of Orlando, a Turtle Troop for children goes out onto the beach at 7:30 a.m. with a Disney staff member to identify the tracks of loggerhead, leatherback and green turtles, locate new nests and mark them with stakes.

HIGHLIGHT -- Participants on turtle walks are given an adoption certificate -- with a color photo -- for a turtle tagged with a satellite-tracked G.P.S. transmitter, whose location can be traced on www.cccturtle.org.

WHERE -- The Lodge on Little St. Simons Island, Ga.; (888) 733-5774 or (912) 638-7472; www.littlestsimonsisland.com.

WHEN -- May to September.

WHAT -- Guests, under the guidance of a sea turtle technician hired for the Loggerhead season, help survey beaches for nests, identify fresh crawls and excavate nests after eggs have hatched. The data collected are submitted to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

HIGHLIGHT -- The Turtle Tracks package includes a fifth night free with any Sunday-through-Thursday reservation during nesting season.

WHERE -- Tortuga Lodge and Gardens, Tortuguero, Costa Rica; 506 257 0766; www.costaricaexpeditions.com.

WHEN -- July to September.

WHAT -- This lodge, owned and operated by Costa Rica Expeditions, is a few hundred yards from the 47,000-acre Tortuguero National Park (the name comes from the Spanish word for turtle), considered the most important Atlantic green sea turtle nesting spot in the Western Hemisphere. The best time to come is in August, when mating, nesting and hatching all take place.

HIGHLIGHT -- Ocean conditions permitting, visitors can sometimes go out by fishing boat to observe turtles mating in the waters off the coast.

WHERE -- The Four Seasons Resort, Nevis, West Indies (869) 469-1111; www.fourseasons.com.

WHEN -- Year-round.

WHAT -- Introduced in January and developed in cooperation with the Sea Turtle Survival League and the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, the program includes educational materials, nighttime walks, children's activities and, for families checking in with children 16 and under, adoption certificates for G.P.S.-tagged turtles that can be tracked online. Warning: Turtle activity, which takes place in summer, is minimal on the resort's beach.

HIGHLIGHT -- The executive pastry chef turns out turtle-shaped Rice Krispie treats with flippers made with mini-gingerbread cookies and heads and tails of marzipan. JANE MARGOLIES