

SEE Turtles Responsible Tourism Policy

Worldwide, sea turtle conservationists are working to find economic alternatives to poaching and destructive fishing practices. Conservation programs often replace or reduce markets for direct use of turtle products in low-income communities, resulting in resentment and low involvement in conservation efforts. Conservationists have a moral obligation to develop ways for local residents to benefit economically from turtle protection programs that reduce their income. A promising alternative for some communities is a modest, carefully managed tourism program that generates income for residents and conservation programs while minimizing negative impacts.

As a non-profit conservation tourism project, SEE Turtles' entire function is to support important sea turtle habitat and the communities that surround them. The primary goal of this project is to encourage the transition away from destructive and consumptive uses of sea turtles by providing alternative sources of income for local communities. Secondary goals are to support field conservation efforts through increased income and technical support; to set the standard for turtle-friendly ecotourism and elevate sea turtles into a top wildlife attraction; and to inspire life-long conservationists for the ocean and marine wildlife.

Since our launch in 2008, we have:

- Generated more than \$200,000 for conservation and local communities. This income is a combination of donations, small grants, fees, in-kind donations, and spending in locally-owned businesses.
- More than 250 people have visited our partners so far, including volunteers and travelers.
- Small grants we have given to partners have funded the removal of fishing gear and helped train guides in Baja California Sur, as well as paying for beach patrols and allowing a women's cooperative expand an recycled plastic bag program in Costa Rica.
- Our Turtle Watching Best Practices Guide is helping to improve how communities and governments manage turtle tourism.
- We have reached more than 15 million people with the message of responsible turtle tourism through magazines, blogs, enewsletters, and speaking engagements.
- Volunteers recruited through our Matching Service have completed more than 700 shifts patrolling nesting beaches, guarding hatcheries, and other activities.



To ensure that both sea turtles and local communities benefit from every trip, we have developed a Responsible Tourism Policy that covers the following areas:

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Maximizing benefits to conservation and communities

Tourism can be a powerful tool for conservation efforts, though it must be carefully managed to ensure that it adequately addresses the primary threats to local populations and to prevent the negative impacts of uncontrolled coastal development that many turtle sites have faced. Turtle conservation tourism can help to reduce poaching at nesting beaches through increased monitoring and providing an alternative to selling turtle eggs, meat, and shells. Tourism may also be an effective way to replace income to artisanal fishermen who can no longer fish in marine protected areas. However, it is not able to reduce threats such as coastal development and entanglement in commercial fishing nets. For this reason, we created a set of criteria that helps to determine which sites offer the biggest benefit to conservation (please see next section).



We work with local residents to bring people to their sites in the most beneficial way. Our volunteer matching service directly connects potential volunteers with local organizations for long-term support. We actively engage local researchers to ensure that our guidelines take local realities into account. Our itineraries are built in consultation with local organizations to determine how to best support conservation and the community. Our local partners review all promotional materials accuracy and appropriateness. Finally, to build local capacity to handle tourism, we have provided funds and connections to organizations who help to train residents.

In addition to ensuring that we work with the turtle sites that most need the help, SEE Turtles also works to have every visit to a site benefit conservation efforts and local residents. All group tours promoted by SEE Turtles will include a donation to conservation efforts that is given to community-based organizations. The organizations are given flexibility to spend these donations where most needed but are required to report on how these funds are used. In addition, we prioritize local businesses on these trips, including as much as possible hotels, restaurants, and other places that are owned and run by residents. We work with local organizations to prioritize businesses supportive of conservation efforts.

We also provide free marketing services for organizations who run volunteer programs. Longer-term volunteers, while generally paying significantly less than tourists, can generate more benefits for communities by staying with local families, paying them directly for food and lodging. While many for-profit companies offer volunteer placement programs, in general the majority of fees paid to these operators do not end up at the local community. The added costs of these programs also price many willing volunteers out of the market when connecting directly with the organizations can be much more affordable.

Conservation Pricing

SEE Turtles is the first organization in the travel industry to lay out the economic benefits of each tour we promote.

Every tour lists:

Conservation Income: Fees and donations paid to either local wildlife organizations or SEE Turtles to further our educational program. This income goes directly towards protecting nesting beaches, hiring local residents, scientific research, education, and recruiting volunteers. For volunteer trips, this also includes the value of donated time.

Local Communities: Spending at locally-owned businesses near turtle hotspots including hotels, restaurants, activities, and souvenirs. This income helps residents value these creatures as an important resource to protect and inspires local support.

(The remaining tour costs covers guides, drivers, in-country transportation, hotels and activities outside of turtle communities, and overhead and profit for the tour operators.)

Every trip makes a difference to local protection efforts:

- The average conservation benefit per person (\$150) provides income roughly equal to two weeks pay for a local researcher at some projects.
- The average tour with 8 participants generates income up to 10% of some of our partner's budgets.
- The minimum percentage of any tour going to conservation and communities is 25% and ranges up to nearly 70%.

Criteria for choosing conservation sites & communities

To ensure that our partner sites provide maximum conservation impact for endangered turtle populations, we developed a comprehensive set of criteria for selecting sites.

1. Benefits to turtle conservation:

- Importance of the site for turtle conservation.
- Numbers of turtles compared to regional populations.
- Abundance or lack of similar sites for similar species.
- Sufficient turtle numbers to provide a reasonable likelihood of viewing.
- Tourism provides direct alternative work for illegal harvesters or fishermen.
- Conservation projects receive income from tours.
- Established conservation program in place, including scientific research using accepted methods and ability to monitor tourism impacts.



2. Need for alternatives:

- Areas with relatively intense illegal harvesting or bycatch rates.
- Opportunities to provide alternatives to illegal harvesters/fishermen.
- Capacity of local partners to address threats.
- Low current levels of visitation.
- Lack of other non-extractive economic activities.

3. Benefits to the local community:

- Local residents support and are strongly involved in conservation and tourism efforts as managers, employees, advisors, among other roles.
- Local residents are supportive of increased investment in tourism.
- Tourism services are locally owned and staffed where possible.
- Communities benefit financially, such as receiving a portion of revenues from park entrance fees or funds for local schools.

4. Tourism Infrastructure:

- Current tourism infrastructure does not present substantial threats to turtle populations or the local environment.
- Tours conform to accepted guidelines to reduce negative interactions and ensure optimal education for visitors.
- Local partner NGO and/or community organization has developed a plan for controlling and directing development.
- High level of natural beauty to ensure high quality tourist experience.
- Existence of local tour operators willing to get involved.
- Access to the site is guaranteed to residents and tour operators.
- Sufficient number, quality, and variety of cabanas, rooms, hotels, restaurants to accommodate increased visitation.
- Suitability for families (safety, accessibility, additional activities).
- Variety of offerings to see turtles and other activities.

Criteria for tour operator partnerships

Working with like-minded tour operators is key to reaching our goals. We carefully research each company we work with, both inbound and outbound, to ensure that they meet our criteria and will genuinely support efforts to bring sea turtles back from the brink of extinction. For inbound operators, we prioritize companies recommended by our conservation partners and feature these companies to the larger outbound operators that we connect with. We also encourage the operators we work with to advocate for strong environmental policies in the locations they work.

The three primary criteria for tour operators are:

- **Strong support of conservation efforts:** Operators must have a history of partnerships with local organizations, including financial support of conservation and environmental advocacy in the places where they work. The projects that the operator supports should follow accepted best practices to ensure that the needs of the wildlife take precedence to the desires of travelers. In addition, services should be selected to reduce and prevent negative environmental impacts, especially relating to accommodations.
- **Focus on local involvement:** As much as possible, the operator uses local services including hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and transportation companies. Operators should consult with local leaders in the places where their tours visit to ensure that their concerns are addressed. Guides should be residents of the countries.
- **Traveler Education:** Operators should provide all clients materials pre-trip that adequately set expectations for local conditions. Guides should be knowledgeable in local natural history and culture and itineraries should include opportunities to learn about the area's unique cultural and natural assets. Upon returning, operators should provide travelers with opportunities to support local charities.

Turtle Watching Best Practices Guide

If not properly controlled, tourism and the resulting coastal development, can itself become a threat to turtles, other wildlife, and local communities. SEE Turtles is taking several steps to prevent the negative impacts of tourism. Our best practice guidelines are helping local groups, operators, government agencies, and tourists to educate themselves on how to reduce their impacts on wildlife while on vacation. These guidelines resulted from consultations and interviews with more than 30 representatives of 22 conservation groups, tour operators, and government agencies. The practices (attached) range from reducing direct impacts while swimming with turtles or on nesting beaches, as well as protecting beach habitat, ocean-friendly travel tips, and supporting local communities.

To disseminate these practices, we are working with tour operators and their clients, educating the sea turtle community, encouraging adoption by government agencies, and promoting them to the media. Our tour operator partners are pledging to follow these practices on their trips and provide them to their clients through a pocket guide. To reach our turtle colleagues, we hosted a conservation tourism workshop at the 2008 International Sea Turtle Symposium with presentations on best practices and lessons learned by turtle and tourism experts. The workshop was attended by more than 100 turtle conservationists from around the world and we will publish the proceedings in a conservation tourism manual for other groups around the world. To publicize these best practices through the media, we have also developed a media-friendly Top 10 list that can easily be published as a sidebar or feature in travel media outlets.

Below is a condensed version of the guidelines (major area headings), the full guide and additional resources can be found at: www.seeturtles.org/858/turtle-watching.html

On A Nesting Beach

Keep It Dark: Lights affect nesting females and hatchlings.

Respect Mother Turtles: They are producing the next generation and need to lay as many eggs as possible.

Watch Out for Hatchlings.

In the Water

Be a Good Mate: Follow responsible boating practices.

Leave Space: Viewing turtles (and other ocean creatures) from a distance ensures both your safety and the theirs.

Healthy Habitat: Sea turtles and other wildlife need a healthy home to survive.



Responsible Travel Tips

Live Blue: Travel is more meaningful if it leaves a positive impact.

Go Local: Wherever possible, use local services. You will get a more authentic experience and contribute more to the local economy.

Protect Beach Habitat: Beaches are the crucial link between land and water.

Tread lightly on turtle nesting beaches (or any beach you visit.)

Traveler Education

We have developed a wealth of resources to teach people about sea turtles, their threats, and what people can do to protect them. Our guidelines are sent to each traveler before leaving for their trips and promoted on our website. In addition to the guidelines, we promote a comprehensive resources section which educate people on how to travel responsibly. Our website also includes information on each species of sea turtle, including their biology, threats, and ways that people can support conservation efforts.

There is no better way to educate people about sea turtles and the need to protect them than by participating in conservation efforts. Travelers to these sites work directly with researchers to patrol nesting beaches or set nets in foraging areas. Many of the researchers are former poachers or fishermen who are now dedicated conservationists. Travelers receive slide show presentations and pre-trip materials that explain the natural history and ecological importance of sea turtles, the main threats to their survival, how their trip will help, and what additional actions they can take to promote sustainability and turtle conservation when they return home. While with researchers, they learn how the efforts fit into the worldwide strategy and how the research is advancing knowledge of turtles.

Carbon reduction

Sea turtles are as susceptible to climate change as any other wildlife and will be severely affected by rising sea levels, bleaching coral reefs, and rising temperatures. SEE Turtles believes that reducing carbon emissions is everyone's responsibility and that governments must take strong, mandatory action to reducing carbon in our atmosphere. Our trips, where possible, include tree planting as a way to educate people about the effects of climate change. We encourage our travelers to reduce their carbon emissions in our turtle watching guidelines and through pre and post-trip materials. We use our outreach methods including newsletters, blogs, etc. to promote efforts to pass climate change legislation and promote climate-friendly lifestyles.



While we encourage clients to purchase their own carbon offsets, we do not currently offset the emissions of our clients. We believe that offsets can be an effective way to take action, though we prefer to focus on generating resources for community-based conservation efforts and that offsets not supporting this goal take away from this goal. As the project grows and more clients visit our partner sites, we hope to support efforts in these communities to reduce their emissions, where travelers can see the benefits of their support.

Waste reduction

One of the biggest threats to sea turtles around the world is marine debris, most commonly plastic bags. Some species of sea turtles confuse the bags for jellyfish, a primary food source; when swallowed these bags clog the turtles throats, preventing them from feeding. SEE Turtles takes several steps to reduce the creation of waste and litter on our tours. Trips generally include beach clean-ups, often in partnership with local organizations, to clean up turtle nesting beaches.

In Costa Rica, we provided a grant to support an innovative plastic bag recycling program managed by our partner WIDECAS^T Latin America. This program trains cooperatives of local women to recycle bags into attractive handbags, which are sold in hotels and to our clients. We provide where possible reusable plastic water bottles to clients to reduce the use of disposable bottles and provide water to clients. We also promote travelers to prevent creating waste, disposing of it properly, and supporting clean-up efforts through our best practices and outreach.



Volunteer Program

The primary way that most volunteers find turtle programs are through for-profit volunteer programs, which can cost 3-10 times as much as going directly through local organizations. By connecting people with these organizations at no cost, we are broadening the variety of prospective volunteers and making it possible for more people to participate. Since the launch of our volunteer recruitment program in April 2009, we have received more than 1,200 inquiries, far exceeding our initial expectations. To date, we have connected more than 60 people with 12 turtle programs in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Guatemala and expect to double that number over the next year. Those volunteers have covered more than 700 shifts at turtle nesting beaches and 7 of them have received research assistant positions.



SEE Turtles is providing a valuable service to our partners by promoting their programs for free to a wide audience. Volunteers are critical to many field programs, providing manpower to patrol nesting beaches, paying fees that support conservation, and in many cases staying in locally-owned lodging or homestays. We aim to expand this program eventually to include new turtle organizations around the world as well as promoting new research assistant positions.