

PRESS ARTICLE
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Creating Hope for the Survival of Pacific Sea Turtles

On the remote Papua Indonesia beach of Jarmurbsa-Medi, Cruesa (Tetha) Hitipeuw of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Indonesia is pleased to see that her turtle conservation work with the 2 clans who own the beach is showing good results. The villagers' night patrols have reduced predation on the turtles' eggs by feral pigs and monitor lizards and egg harvesting and beach disturbance by the villages themselves is down. The patrols also monitor the number of nesting females on the beach. This beach, 6 hours by speed boat to the nearest town, and others along the same coast, is home to the largest remaining nesting population of leatherback turtles in the whole Pacific. The nesting populations of the critically endangered Pacific leatherbacks have crashed over the last decade. Despite good progress in protecting these leatherbacks, Tetha does not rest easy. A logging company has just begun work in the hinterland of the beach and wants to create log-ponds near the beach. So far the community have managed to block this threat to the turtle nests. Last month, Peter Dutton, one of the world's foremost sea turtle experts and a scientist with the US National Marine Fisheries Service laboratory in San Diego, California, had a team working with Tetha and her local hosts, tagging the 600kg leatherback females as they lumbered ashore to dig their nests and lay their eggs and taking genetic samples from them. The tags and the genetic studies are starting to show that the Jarmurbsa-Medi giants are not just local turtles – they roam the whole Pacific, and commonly tread the Pacific migratory corridor from the island of New Guinea all the way to coastal California.

The Pacific Ocean is home to 6 species of sea turtles, including the leatherback. They lay their eggs in nests on tropical beaches such as the Jarmursba-Medi, always return to the same beaches and make extraordinary migrations that can cover the whole vast Pacific Ocean. Turtle meat and eggs are eaten by many coastal peoples throughout the Pacific islands, along the west coast of the Americas and throughout east Asia and eastern Australia. Ornaments are made from the distinctive tortoise shell of the hawksbill turtle and sea turtles are important in the cultural and social identity of many traditional societies.

