



By Katie Tuttle

Stick your neck out

When endangered animals depend on your environment for survival, it's time to coexist.

Located in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, Bahia Beach Resort & Golf Club is home to more than just humans, and the Bahia Beach staff wants to do their part in keeping it that way.

Of the many animal inhabitants on the island, perhaps none is more special than the leatherback turtles. Leatherbacks are the largest species of turtle, some as large as seven feet in length and reaching up to 2,000 pounds in weight. They are also an endangered species. Although numbers aren't specifically known, National Geographic statistics say that the number of leatherbacks in the Atlantic Ocean is stable or increasing, which is a good sign.

Bahia Beach is doing their part in helping this increase through their endangered species conservation program.

The resort and golf club is located in a very important ecological area on the island. It is surrounded by rainforest and a river runs along beside it. Since the rainforest is the only one nearby, it makes it a very important, natural area. Because of this, Bahia Beach staff decided they needed to work with the environment instead of against it.

Started in 2006, Bahia Beach contacted Audubon International about wanting to do a sustainable project.

"That's how we started our journey with Audubon," says Marcela Cañón, natural resources manager at Bahia Beach Golf Club. "We wanted to work with nature."

Their first step was working on residence

projects with the villas and verandas at the resort. Everything was developed under Audubon and everything on their management plan was approved by Audubon.

Bahia Beach's management plans include wildlife conservation, water quality and conservation, energy saving and waste management. A subcategory of water conservation is their endangered species conservation program, which includes leatherback turtle and manatee protection.

Formal leatherback nesting season is from March to August, and this is when the turtles travel an average of 3,700 miles between where they feed and where they breed, which is the same beach as where they were hatched.

"These animals are amazing," says Cañón. "They come back to the same beach, but

they also migrate to different areas. They don't come back every year to nest, so the numbers vary."

Bahia Beach has a turtle watching volunteer program that involves both staff and community members.

"People are really proud of it," Cañón says. "They take care of their turtles, and that's really important."

When a turtle comes ashore, volunteers clean it. They then call the National Resources Puerto Rico Department, which will send an officer to the location to follow the turtle until it begins nesting.

When the turtle is finished nesting, the area is marked off with rope and a sign is put in place, stating that federal law protects the area and no one is allowed inside the rope. The eggs do not hatch until two months later.



Marcela Cañón, natural resources manager at Bahia Beach Golf Club, with a few newly-hatched sea turtles.

Below: a female sea turtle laying her eggs.
Right: leatherback hatchlings dig out of the nest.



“[The number of hatchlings] changes so much,” says Cañón. “A turtle lays from 80 to 150 eggs. Out of those, around 60 to 70 will hatch.”

The number of nests also varies year to year. In 2012, Bahia Beach had six nests and only about 250 turtles hatched. The year before, they had 24 nests and counted over 1,500 turtles.

Even though the turtles hatch, that doesn’t mean they’re necessarily going to make it to the water.

“Just one out of 1,000 survives from hatching to adulthood,” says Cañón. “One of their

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– Marcela Cañón, Bahia Beach Resort & Golf Club

most dangerous phases is from hatching to the water because they have lots of predators.”

More volunteers are on site for the hatching. The staff is able to track the eggs from laying to hatching, so they know exactly when the small turtles should be making the trek from the nest to the water. The volunteers are there to try and keep them safe as they make the big journey to the water, keeping predators and unsuspecting humans away.

“We have increased the number of turtles that survive from 1-out-of-1,000 to 10-out-of-1,000,” says Cañón.

Along with protecting the turtles, the resort also turns it into an educational opportunity for the guests, as well as the people in the community.

“We have an educational program that comes with it,” says Cañón. “We have a different campaign each year. We talk to the kids in public schools about these issues and we always include the turtle conservations. We help to change minds.”

“It’s something amazing,” she adds, “to see what people do. To see kids transmit the message to their homes.”

Another way they educate the community

is by holding a yearly beach cleanup at the end of April. Usually 250 to 350 people show up to help pick up the trash that’s washed ashore. Cañón says this event helps people realize that anything they throw into the water has the potential to cause harm to sea life.

In fact, trash is a large cause of death in Leatherback turtles. The turtles’ main source of food is floating jellyfish, which can look very similar to floating pieces of plastic and trash. When the turtles ingest it, they can choke and die. On a few occasions, the turtles have been found to have as much as 11 pounds of plastic in their stomachs.

With the beach cleanup program, people

Dogs’ best friend

Along with the turtle conservation, Bahia Beach also has a stray dog recovery program. While the dogs aren’t native, wild animals to the island, they have become a huge problem.

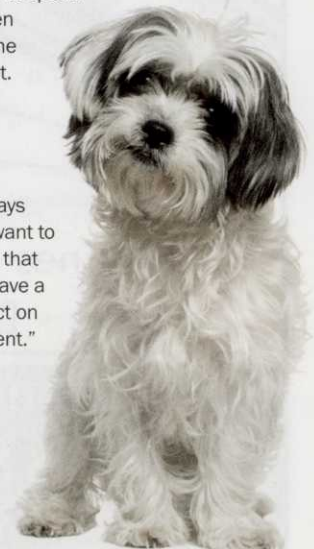
“People are not aware of all the needs of a pet,” says Bahia Beach Resort & Golf Club’s Marcela Cañón. “They just throw them to the streets.”

The stray dog problem in Puerto Rico is now in the thousands, with most of the dogs starving to death, getting hit by cars, or being sent to animal shelters, where they are euthanized.

Bahia Beach rescues some of the dogs, taking care of them and trying to help get them adopted.

The resort even pays to take the dogs to the vet.

“We’re trying to be a responsible part [of the community] says Cañón. “You want to do something that will last and have a positive impact on the environment.”





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Just one sea turtle out of 1,000 survives from hatching to adulthood, and one of their most dangerous phases is from hatching to the water. Volunteers are on site for the hatching to keep the turtles safe as they make the big journey to the water.




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are both helping the environment, and understanding that they need to do their part to take better care of it.

"Think of everything you throw that ends up on the beach," Cañón says. "[They] see it because they have to pick it up, little by little."

Overall, Cañón says the response of resort guests to the turtle conservation projects has been overwhelming. They are able to be a part of this moving, very touching event and it is something that will always be with them.

"They'll always have wildlife conservation on their mind," she says.

An example of this is a story Cañón will always remember. One of the guests at the resort was a young boy who was in a wheelchair.

"He loved turtles," she says. "He had never actually seen a wild turtle."

While the family was staying at the resort, the staff called them down and took them to the beach to see a hatching.

"It was something really amazing to see the light in his eyes when he saw the little tiny turtles," Cañón says. "He was just overwhelmed with happiness. It was something major; it was something amazing." GCI

Katie Tuttle is assistant editor at GCI.