



## **Help a rural community-based sea turtle nest survey and protection programme on Moso Island, Vanuatu**

### **Översikt**

Volunteering with turtles as a part of vital sea turtle conservation will take you to the turquoise waters and golden sands of Vanuatu, voted the 'happiest place on earth' in 2006 by the New Economics Foundation. This grassroots effort to protect sea turtles is run by the inhabitants of Tasiriki village on Moso Island, from the long-term nesting survey that was started in 2006 in conjunction with Wan Smolbag and GVI.

Joining this project will also give you the chance to try your hand at many other activities that occur in the village, such as reef surveying, teaching at the village school and cooking local food. In your spare time you can snorkel on tropical reefs, learn to dive or just sit and 'storian' with your new friends in the village.

### **Projektet**

Despite the traditional controls on turtle use in many Pacific countries, the last 50 to 100 years have seen a marked increase in the killing of all age classes of turtles for their eggs, shells and meat. Hawksbill turtle populations are severely depleted and as a result have been listed as a critically endangered species by the IUCN. In 1995 Wan Smolbag, with funding from the UK Department for International Development, conducted a research and theatre project in response to the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme's (SPREP) Year of the Turtle Campaign. The result of this play was the creation of a network of village volunteers, named turtle monitors, that continues today. The initial group of monitors, from the island of Efate, instigated bans on the killing of turtles and the taking of eggs. The Efate monitors were keen to share the results of their work in villages around the country and SPREP and WWF provided funding through the late 90s and early 2000s for this to happen.

Over the past 10 years, the network has evolved and grown. Where the original monitors concentrated their efforts on turtles, the Vanua-Tai (of land and sea) resource monitors, work with a range of species. That small network of monitors from Efate Island is still growing, and today boasts more than 300 monitors representing communities in all six provinces of the country.

One of the communities involved in the Vanua-Tai network is the village of Tasiriki, located on the island of Moso. The information previously provided by the resource monitors in this area suggests that this may be a nationally significant area for Hawksbill turtles. The reefs surrounding the island appear to be a year-round feeding ground for this species, and there are kilometres of isolated beaches on the west side of the island that see many Hawksbill and Green turtles nesting on them each year. While the monitors in this area believe that there are large numbers of turtles nesting on these beaches they simply do not have the time or manpower to effectively walk the beach to count nests, much less conduct a proper nesting survey as well as protect the nests from predators.

## Mera om projektet

The nesting beach is located on a small island just offshore from the island of Efate (where the capital city of Port Vila is located). From the international airport a 40-minute bus ride followed by a 15-minute boat ride brings you to the shores of Tasiriki village on Moso Island. From here, it is a 1-hour hike across the island through lush rainforest jungle, to reach the nesting beach. While it is only an hour away from the village, the nesting beach is isolated enough to give you the impression that you are living on a deserted tropical island. That is perhaps one of the reasons that this island has been used to film several versions of the television reality show 'Survivor'.

\* Your project life will vary depending on the time of the season:

\* (September-October) During the early part of the season volunteers concentrate on setting up the project and making improvements for community and volunteers. For Example, volunteer's determine the beach's length and how much of it can be properly surveyed, dividing those parts of the beach into sectors. There will also be time to do many things such as reef surveys, capturing and tagging turtles on their feeding grounds, clearing forest tracks, helping with construction, setting up a volunteer garden and providing teacher aid at the local primary school. Turtle activity will begin leading into an increase in nightly Turtle beach patrols.

\* (November) The nesting season will be building towards its peak this month. The main work for volunteers on the project will be the nightly trips to the nesting beach. This will make for long but rewarding nights spent patrolling the beach to locate and tag nesting turtles. November is often dry so this is one of the months where we will be able to maximize our tagging efforts. During the day volunteers may utilise their time by taking part in activities like reef surveys, helping at the school, maintaining a volunteer garden, etc.

\* (December-January) In the middle of the season when the nesting is at its peak most of the work will revolve around the nightly nesting surveys. In addition to working with the nesting turtles as we enter January volunteers will now start to find that the nests laid earlier in the season are starting to hatch. It will not be uncommon to come across hatchlings running for the sea during nightly patrols. Once the nests have hatched we will be excavating the nests to determine the nesting success.

\* (February) Towards the late part of the season the nesting will decline. At this time more emphasis will be placed on monitoring and assisting the emergence of hatchlings, and determining the success of nests. There will also be time to take part in the additional activities around the village that take place throughout the season.

\* (March) This is one of the most important months as volunteers collect the hatching data from the turtles whilst being involved with help around the community. The last of the potential nesting turtles will be finished early in the month at which point the work on the beach will involve collecting data from the hatched nests.

*En av Vanuatus många solindränkta stränder*



## En volontär berättar

I finally managed to get back to the nesting beach yesterday and last night and got my first look at turtle hatchlings!! So beautiful and such brave little ones. They're only about 2 inches long when they emerge from the nest and it was an amazing site watching them trying to pull themselves along the sand and up and over little ridges of rock or plant material to get to the water. Sometimes getting snagged on a blade of grass, but always struggling on. They certainly have a great sense of direction - onward to the sea!!!

When we'd walked to the end of the nesting beach, we sat and rested for about 45 minutes before heading back - this is to allow time for any adults to emerge from the sea to come up to nest. As we lay down on our backpacks and looked at the Vanuatu sky (similar to ours at home), Kalo (our local turtle monitor) and I talked about everything!!! It was great to get to know him and his culture even more and he was equally fascinated with my culture.

We talked about our families (he knows all your names now kids), and many other things. He seemed particularly interested in comparing restaurants in Australia to those in Vanuatu, and thought that the restaurants in Australia seemed amazing. I told him that the local ni-Vans had the best restaurant of all, right at their home - the Pacific Ocean. As we sat there, a storm passed over us with much lightning. At one point Kalo asked "where does all that light come from"? Boy, do we take so much for granted! He was also fascinated by the concept of the internet and asked how I'd heard about this volunteer work. So he's been in here with me this morning and I showed him the GVI website, which had a big photo of himself on it!! He loved it.

Last Tuesday, Bec and I went back to the school to visit the children and give them the books, pencils and assorted other things we'd brought over for them. They were very excited and there were big white grins all around. Bec had also brought a toy Curlew for them - complete with Curlew call. That was a real hit. When we returned to Moso from Vila, last Friday, our Bungalow living area had been freshly decorated with flowers and the locals were preparing "stick meat" (aka kebabs!) for a big BBQ for us. Friday night is party night on Moso! The band was there and there was a bit of dancing and silliness going on. I taught the locals how to do the "Twist"....now known as the Turtle Twist! So, no doubt, more frivolity tonight on our return.

We've also been busy this week checking nests during the day. We do this about 15 days after the due hatching date, to gather data on egg numbers, live hatchlings and mortality rates. Often when we dig up a nest, we come across some of the hatchlings as they're making their way to the surface, for the long haul to the sea. It is truly amazing to watch these little ones struggle over the terrain to get to the ocean. They are so small, yet so determined. I think it's probably as amazing as seeing a silverback gorilla rip a stem of bamboo out of the ground in front of you. Nature sure knows how to bring a tear to a girl's eye!!! We had a day off last Thursday and went across to Tranquility Island Dive resort (at the western end of Moso), to do some diving!

My co-volunteers have all had diving experience and brought their gear with them to do some dives. Last Friday, I decided to buy some snorkelling gear, so that I could at least enjoy a view of the reef from the surface. I did a bit of snorkelling with Bec, which I thoroughly enjoyed, but when we went to Tranquility, Bec convinced me to do a "Discovery Dive". After a thorough briefing on how to use a regulator to breathe, how to equalise (unblock) my ears, and how to clear my mask underwater, I headed into the deep blue with my instructor buddy, Fabby. She was great and I had a fantastic time gliding over the coral reef and exploring a whole new world below. We dived to about 9 metres, which was great for a "first time". Something I may have to pursue!

This trip has really given me opportunities that may never have eventuated and I'm very grateful for that. As some of my new Vanuatuan friends have been telling me, "Jen is a lucky Woman"! Bec and I have been getting on really well with all the locals, and have made some truly wonderful friends. Both of us have been given a "Custom Name" (which is quite an honour! I am Leiwia (which in Bislama means "Good Woman"). I've obviously got these guys fooled!!! Bec is Leisalewia (Woman who has come from across the sea (or something like that) ).

I think we'll have many pen friends when we get home. They want to know so much about the outside world - even though there's is almost idyllic! This coming week will be busy. More midnight turtle taggings, assisting with a reef survey (we have to snorkel a certain distance along the reef and count different marine species (fish, coral etc, and remove Crown of Thorns starfish from the reef). Sounds like hard bloody work, but someone has to do it!!! The community is planning a Big Farewell for us for next Thursday Night. No doubt it will be a real party. These people sure know how to have fun. Many of them have said they don't want us to leave, so I'm sure we'll all feel a little sad too!

Cheers, Jen Whitney, volontär Vanuatu,

## Vilken skillnad gör detta projekt?

The Vanua-Tai (meaning 'Of Land and Sea') Natural Resource Monitors are a national network of community members that are working within their communities to institute bans on the harvest of turtles and their eggs in coastal villages all across Vanuatu. Coordinated by Wan Smolbag Theatre (WSB) in the capital of Port Vila, this network has been growing in size and accomplishments since its inception in 1995. In addition to working with communities to conserve their turtles WSB has started to work with communities to conduct surveys of turtles nesting beaches. One community that became involved in this effort, Tasiriki Village, is located on the shores of Moso Island. Moso is home to a nationally significant nesting beach and foraging grounds for Hawksbill turtles. However the people of Tasiriki were slow to join onto the nesting beach survey effort as the time involved to conduct the surveys is significant. At this point WSB suggested the possibility of setting the survey up as an international volunteer project and contacted GVI. GVI then joined with WSB and the community to provide volunteers to the project. Without the volunteer involvement this survey would cease to continue. The labour that the volunteers provide is actually a small part of their total contribution. The money that the community receives from the volunteers provides a small income to many people in the village that would otherwise not have one. It pays for the project manager, the turtle guides that work with the volunteers on the beach and all the women that take care of the bungalows and cook for the volunteers.

## Höjdpunkter

Living and working with the 'happiest people on earth', contributing to research on local turtle populations, seeing nesting turtles and hatchlings, exploring the stunning island's beaches and forests.

## Plats

Vanuatu is a Melanesian island nation located in the South Pacific Ocean. The archipelago of 83 islands is located some 1,750 km east of Australia, west of Fiji and south of the Solomon Islands. Volunteers will have the opportunity to explore the beaches of Moso and snorkel or dive in crystal clear waters. If you have the time and a sense of adventure you can see a bit more of the country before you finish your trip to Vanuatu. Past project volunteers have given a 'must see' rating to two things: Yassur volcano and the S.S. Coolidge. Yassur, on the island of Tanna, is the most accessible active volcano in the world. Whether they felt it was exhilarating or down right terrifying every volunteer coming back has said it was amazing. And if you have your diving certification the S.S. Coolidge is the pinnacle of wreck diving. A cruiseship that was converted into a troop carrier during WWII the Coolidge sank just off the island of Santo when it hit an underwater mine. Floating around inside a ship and seeing things like full size Jeeps laying about is only topped by diving the wreck at night where you will see clouds of flashlight fish that light up the inside of the wreck and guarantee to make you feel like you're in the middle of a sci-fi movie.

## Ute i fält

The community is quite proud of the accommodations they have built for the volunteers and continue to improve upon them each year. At present there are two bungalows for the volunteers to stay in while they are living in the village. Each bungalow is split into two rooms and each room has two single beds. There are two bucket flush toilets and two huts for bucket showers. The newest addition is a dining hall/common room. This will provide the volunteers with a spot to gather for meals as well as a place to relax on rainy days. Amenities will be sparse, but the basics are there.

At the bungalows, drinking water will be provided by a rainwater collection tank and a nearby freshwater spring will provide refreshing cold water that is used for bucket showering. Volunteers will eat local food prepared by members of the community. Vegetarians are welcome, but please notify us ahead of time. The turtle beach is a 40-60 minute hike from the village.

Blueberry Volontär

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## Utbildning

All volunteers will accompany the staff on the first night and will learn how the community turtle monitors tag and measure a turtle. Volunteers will always be accompanied by a staff member and at a minimum will work in pairs. In Vanuatu turtle tagging is only done by people who have undergone training with Wan Smolbag staff. As a volunteer you will not be tagging turtles but you will be helping with the process (e.g. holding the turtles, recording data, etc.)

Other studies in which you might participate include:

- \* Reef surveys

Volunteers are integral to the success of this project and will be involved in all aspects of the project. Volunteers should note that most of our work will take place after dark. Although several activities are undertaken during the day, the daylight hours are essentially "free-time". This time can be used to catch up on sleep, relax, or take part in other activities in the community. Therefore volunteers are advised to bring reading material, board games, cards, etc., to occupy themselves. A hammock is useful for finding a shady tree where there is a breeze.

## Det dagliga livet

- \* 0700-0900: Volunteers usually wake-up at this time and have breakfast
- \* 1000–1230: Assist with other activities in the village (free time)
- \* 1230-1330: Lunch
- \* 1330–1630: Assist with other activities in the village (free time)
- \* 1630-1730: Dinner
- \* 1730-1830: Hike to the nesting beach
- \* 1830-1900: Rest
- \* 1900-2400-: Turtle data collection commences with beach surveys, tagging, measurements, etc.
- \* 2400-0100-: Hike back to the village
- \* 0100: Clean up and crawl into bed

Volunteers should be aware that schedules can and do fluctuate. Weather and work conditions can affect the daily schedule. Should this situation arise, your cooperation and understanding are appreciated.

In addition to assisting with turtle surveys the community are excited to have volunteers take part in other activities within the community. A partial list of some of these activities is as follows.

## Förkunskaper

The beach where the monitoring takes place is a 40-60 minute walk over mixed terrain. Once on the beach the research work involves quite a lot more walking (up to 12km a night) so volunteers should be comfortable walking several kilometers at a time. It is well worth getting prepared in advance by doing some strenuous walks/hikes before you arrive to build up your stamina. If you are buying new boots/shoes please work them in before starting on the project.

## Annat som händer i byn

Activities that the community might like assistance with:

- \* Marking out and mapping any tabu areas (e.g. marine or terrestrial conservation areas).
- \* Surveying tabu areas to monitor the natural resources within them.
- \* Beach, reef, village, etc. clean-ups.
- \* Help out at the kindergarten or primary school (e.g. help supervise or just talk to the children about the country you come from and any other topics that might be of interest).
- \* Training community members in first aid.
- \* Collect washed up coral for use in the community.
- \* Collect firewood.
- \* Help in the community gardens.

Day-to-day activities in the community that the volunteers might like to learn about:

- \* Using local materials to weave mats, bags, etc.
- \* Cooking local meals.
- \* Sewing local island dresses.
- \* Attending choir practice.
- \* Hearing the local string band play and learning how to play their instruments.
- \* Going to the market to sell fruit and vegetables from the gardens.
- \* Attending church services.
- \* See custom dancing.
- \* Listen to custom stories.
- \* Attend village fundraising events.
- \* Carving local outrigger canoes, and traveling in them.
- \* Learn the local language (Bislama)

## Foton från projektet



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