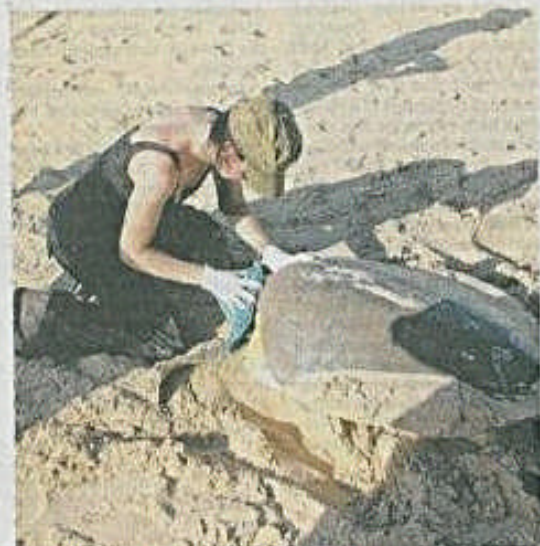


MAKING A DIFFERENCE



'Midwife' Rasha Skybey with a flatback turtle laying eggs

Hands-on with turtle research on a remote West Australian beach

CATHERINE MARSHALL

It must surely rate as one of the most exhilarating travel experiences of all time: serving as midwife to a flatback turtle on a hot white-sand beach near Broome at the top of Western Australia.

It was at such a moment that Rasha Skybey's decision to switch from a career in law to one dedicated to conservation was thoroughly vindicated.

"I'd never ever encountered a turtle before. She came on to the shore in the middle of the day, which is highly unusual, and right there in front of the resort she decided to dig and lay her eggs," Skybey says.

"The most magical thing about it was that we were actually assisting this prehistoric creature.

"She was completely oblivious

to us, and in a hypnotic state. I felt like a bit of a midwife. I was helping her, rubbing her back. She laid about 40 eggs, which was quite a number."

Skybey was on assignment with Biosphere Expeditions, an award-winning non-profit organisation established by German-born biologist Matthias Hammer. The organisation channels labour as well as funds to select scientific projects across the world via expedition team members.

While travellers busy themselves collecting data, reading animal tracks and setting up wildlife cameras, their expedition fee is hard at work, too, with at least two-thirds of the cost being reinvested into the project at hand.

The expeditions have yielded outstanding results over the past decade, such as the incorporation of recommendations into the

management of jaguars in Brazil and coral reefs in Honduras, the declaration of a protected area for snow leopards in the Altai Republic in Russian Central Asia, and a reduction in the numbers of big cats being killed by Namibian farmers.

And the company perpetuates the ethos of conservation at the local level, too, Hammer says.

"We always have local capacity-building projects such as scholarships and training. We're trying to train locals to deliver projects on the ground so we can harness people's enthusiasm for conservation."

As Skybey discovered in Broome, such enthusiasm is rewarded a thousandfold: her egg-counting experience was an important part of a study on the status of flatback turtles, a breed that nests exclusively in Australia

and is believed to be endangered.

"Our role was to assist the scientists to determine nesting numbers by measuring and tagging, selecting DNA samples and recording data.

"There isn't enough data as yet to determine whether they are endangered or not," she explains.

The presence of the flatback — nicknamed the Virgin Turtle, as it was the first time she had laid eggs and perhaps she was disoriented and confused — caused excitement on the same beach where it is likely she was hatched some years earlier.

"There were a number of members of the general public watching, but they weren't allowed to get involved," Skybey says.

"We had the training, we had to wear gloves, and a scientist supervised us at all times.

"People aren't encouraged to go

up [to a turtle] and do this."

But Biosphere Expeditions does encourage people of all ages and abilities to make a practical contribution in a field once off-limits to all but the learned scientific community.

And the impact of its projects can be felt way beyond the realm of wildlife and marine reserves. Skybey was prompted to trade in her legal job in Sydney for a career with a Melbourne-based environmental group.

Such a transformation of a volunteer spells huge success for Hammer, who hopes to expose as many people as possible to the conservation bug.

"There has been a change in attitude," he says. "Rather than just consuming, people want to contribute. And rather than watching David Attenborough wildlife documentaries, we want

to make sure they get out there and do it themselves."

Checklist

Biosphere's next expedition monitoring flatback turtles along the WA coastline takes place on November 7-14, using as its base the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat, which offers safari-style ensuite tents, team size is up to 12, plus two scientists and an expedition leader, and volunteers are accommodated on a twin-share basis (upgrades to single available on request). Other projects include surveying and safeguarding coral reefs and whale sharks in the Maldives, and assisting in the conservation of jaguars, pumas, ocelots and other species in Brazil's rainforest through research and community resource management. More: biosphere-expeditions.org

Hands-on with turtle research on a remote West Australian beach

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"Midwife" Rasha Skybey with a flatback turtle laying eggs in Broome. *Source:* Supplied

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