

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. We 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 organization, SEE Turtles' mission is to support important sea turtle habitat and the communities that surround them. Our primary goal is to encourage the transition away from destructive and consumptive uses of sea turtles by providing alternative and/ or strengthening existing sustainable sources of income for local communities. Secondary goals are to support field-based efforts through increased income and technical support, to set the standard for turtle-friendly ecotourism, and to elevate sea turtles into a top wildlife attraction; and to inspire life-long advocates for the ocean.

Since our launch in 2008, we have:

- Generated more than \$1 million in benefits for conservation projects and local communities. This income is a combination of donations, small grants, fees, in-kind donations, and spending in locally-owned businesses;
- More than 1,200 people have visited our sea turtle conservation partners and volunteers on our trips have completed more than 4,000 work shifts at turtle projects;
- Small grants we have given to partners have funded the removal of fishing gear and helped train guides in Baja California Sur, pays local residents and former poachers to patrol nesting beaches, and supported a women's cooperative that recycles plastic bags into handbags in Costa Rica;
- Our [Turtle Watching Best Practices Guide](#) helps improve how communities and governments manage turtle tourism;
- Our [Billion Baby Turtles](#) program has saved more than 1 million hatchlings at important turtle nesting beaches around the world; and
- Our [Too Rare To Wear](#) campaign is working with the tourism industry to end the demand for turtleshell products.

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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1. 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 wildlife populations and to prevent social and environmental negative impacts of uncontrolled coastal development that many sea 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 benefits to sea turtles.

To maximize positive impacts to sea turtle conservation and local communities, SEE Turtles will:

- Work with local organizations to bring travelers and volunteers to their research and conservation sites in the most beneficial way to the turtles, other wildlife, and communities.
- Actively engage local researchers to ensure that our guidelines take local realities into account and ensure our suppliers follow these guidelines. Our itineraries are built in consultation with local organizations and suppliers to determine how to best support conservation and the community. Our partners review all promotional materials accuracy and appropriateness.
- Every visit to a sea turtle project benefit conservation efforts and local residents. In addition to fees and payments to local organizations and businesses, all SEE Turtles trips include a donation to conservation efforts that is given to community-based organizations through our Billion Baby Turtles program
- 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.

2. Criteria for Choosing Conservation Sites & Communities

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

1. Benefits to sea turtles:

- Importance of the site for sea turtle conservation (both regionally and worldwide)
- Numbers of sea turtles protected compared to regional populations
- Abundance or lack of similar sites for similar species
- Sufficient sea turtle numbers to provide a reasonable likelihood of viewing.
- Tourism provides direct alternative work for those impacting sea turtles, such as egg harvesters, hunters, 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 egg harvesters/fishermen.
- Capacity of local partners to address threats.
- Relatively low current levels of visitation.
- Lack of other non-extractive economic activities in the area.

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 best practices to reduce negative interactions and ensure optimal education for visitors.
- High level of natural beauty to ensure high quality tourist experience.
- Existence of local tour operators willing to support tour logistics.
- Access to the site is guaranteed to residents and tour operators.
- Sufficient number, quality, and variety of cabanas, rooms, hotels, restaurants to accommodate groups.
- Suitability for families (safety, accessibility, and additional activities).
- Variety of offerings to see sea turtles and participate in other activities.

3. Criteria for Local Suppliers

Working with like-minded suppliers is key to reaching our goals. We carefully research each company we work with to ensure that they meet our criteria and will genuinely support efforts to bring sea turtles back from the brink of extinction and benefit nearby communities. We also encourage the operators we work with to advocate for strong environmental policies in the locations they work.

The criteria for suppliers are:

- Company has demonstrated success in adventure travel and/or conservation tourism.
- Company has a risk management plan and proven track record for safety, and can supply a list and explanation of any serious incidents or claims in the past 5 years and any steps taken to resolve the issue if applicable.
- Company is in compliance with all laws, rules, and regulations and is duly qualified and licensed to do business in each jurisdiction that requires such qualification or licensing.
- Company acknowledges that the company, the owner(s) of the company, and no member of the company's senior management team or employees that directly interact with clients, each has not been convicted of a felony, or been the subject of a pending criminal felony allegation, nor have files, or had filed against it, him or her, as the case may be, a petition under federal bankruptcy laws or any state or province insolvency laws during the five years immediately preceding the date of this submission.
- The company is currently able to meet its financial obligations; and has no reasonable expectation that it will not be able to meet its financial obligations or become financially insolvent during the 12 months following the date of this submission.
- The company has a process to train all guides in first aid and CPR and conducts background checks on all staff that interact directly with clients.
- Company has a crisis management plan and is accessible 24/7 for dealing with emergencies. A copy of the plan will be provided.
- Company can provide at least 3 references from clients and/or other service providers.
- Company can provide a description of the process for selecting and supervising the tour guides that accompany tours (if applicable).
- Company will confirm that background checks are performed on all employees who have regular contact with groups.
- Company has a strong track record of supporting wildlife conservation and/or research efforts as well as local communities.
- Company actively encourages reduction of waste and water usage in its operations and during its trips.

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 takes 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, which can be found here, 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.

Below is a condensed version of the guidelines (major area headings), the full guide and additional resources can be found at:

On A Nesting Beach

- **Keep It Dark:** Lights affect nesting females and hatchlings, avoid using flash photos and bright flashlights around them.
- **Respect Mother Turtles:** They are producing the next generation and need to lay as many eggs as possible.
- **Watch Out for Hatchlings:** Walk carefully to avoid stepping on them and only touch hatchlings (or adults too) if part of a conservation or research program and avoid unnecessary manipulation of turtles.

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.

Blue Mind

Spending time in nature, working to restore endangered species, brings with it vast cognitive, emotional, psychological, social, physical and spiritual benefits. The best guides acknowledge, enhance and maximize the value of these benefits.

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.)

SEE Turtles Traveler Code of Conduct

One of the better way to educate people about sea turtles and the need to protect them than by participating in conservation efforts. But traveler behavior can have a large impact on local wildlife and communities and SEE Turtles strives to bring travelers that will be active participants in improving local conditions and minimize negative impacts on the locations that our trips visit. SEE Turtles requests that all travelers conduct themselves in a responsible manner while on our trips, including:

Respect For Sea Turtles And Other Wildlife

- Follow all rules and guidelines provided by local partners when around sea turtles or in sea turtle habitat;
- Allow project staff and guides to take the lead in any research and conservation activity including beach patrols and in-water monitoring;
- Do not touch or get too close to any wild sea turtles or other wildlife while in the water on a beach (unless specifically permitted to by local researchers);
- Seek out souvenirs that are not made from materials that threaten local wildlife or fauna, including those made from the shell of sea turtles;
- Never feed any wild animals; and
- Leave behind any natural objects including coral or rocks.

Respect for Local Communities & Cultures

- Use locally-owned businesses wherever possible, including hotels, souvenir shops, guides, and restaurants and be sure to tip appropriately. Supporting local communities on our trips is an important way to ensure that residents support conservation efforts and visitors to their communities and ensure that more money is kept in the places where it is needed most;
- Be respectful of local customs and norms, especially those related to dress and behavior in public and bargaining at markets. SEE Turtles will provide any relevant information including cultural norms and current political and social situations in each location in advance of the trip; and
- Follow all rules and regulations when visiting community sites, historical locations, or protected areas.

Reduce Environmental Impact

- Reduce the use of disposable plastic items including water bottles and plastic bags by bringing your own reusable bottles and bags and avoiding straws where possible (we will provide clean drinking water to fill bottles with);
- Choose environmentally-friendly options during meals, including sustainably-caught sea food;
- Never litter or leave trash behind and actively participate in beach clean-up efforts when organized; and
- Minimize water and energy usage by turning lights off when leaving rooms, reusing towels for more than one shower, turning off faucets when not using them.

Complaints Process

If SEE Turtles receives any complaints from a tour, staff will investigate accordingly. In the event of a severe incident, the crisis management plan will be activated. The Compliant Process is as follows.

- Staff will record and document the complaint
- Based upon the nature of the complaint, staff will investigate the allegations or report. The investigation may include conversations with the people lodging the complaint, any witnesses or other people involved in the situation, the tour operator. The tour operator's guides or other subcontractor involved in the incident.
- Determine the action to be taken which may include:
 - No action required
 - A conversation with the tour operator expressing concerns
 - A written request for some action on the part of the tour operator
 - Terminate the relationship with the tour operator

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 enewsletters, 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 & Water 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 WIDECASST 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.