S

av ing sea turtles and their n ests is hard work. It means nitely pursuing nesting tracks, keeping a look out for signs of disturbance, ensuring that nests are not trampled by visitors or foraging feral dogs, and vigilantly monitoring them for the entire nesting season. During this period, sea turtles lay their eggs in the sand, leaving them vulnerable to predation and theft. Despite these challenges, many conservationists and volunteers continue to work hard to protect these magnificent creatures.

**The Last Resort**

**In an effort to save critically endangered sea turtles from poachers, new conservation projects turn to travelers into citizen scientists.**

**Words & Photography by Shaun Futrell**

Clockwise from top: A leatherback turtle leaves a nesting site. Participants check to ensure whether any nests have been disturbed by predators or human activity. A hatchling in its protective case. The heads of hatchlings are ringed before being measured and weighed.

**The Amazing Work Carried Out by LAST**

Last year saw a dramatic upturn in the fortunes of the leatherback turtle. Following years of fluctuating numbers and a return to the high seas, the conservationists at Latin American Sea Turtles (LAST) were delighted to see a positive trend in the population of this species. However, despite this encouraging news, the threats to sea turtles around the world — and, sadly, most are endangered. The threats to these vulnerable creatures are many and varied. Rising sea levels due to climate change, poaching, and habitat destruction are just a few of the challenges that sea turtles face.

**The Threats to Sea Turtles**

Despite their different nationalities and geographic locations, sea turtles face many of the same threats. Rising sea levels due to climate change are a significant concern as they can lead to habitat loss and changes in water temperatures. Poaching is another major threat, with some species targeted for their meat, shells, and eggs. Habitat destruction, such as the loss of nesting beaches due to development and coastal erosion, also poses a serious threat to sea turtle populations.

**The Mission ofLAST**

Led by resident biologist Fabián Carrasco, LAST has been protecting sea turtles in Costa Rica — this eight-day wildlife conservation project along with a team of scientists, research assistants and volunteers from LAST (Latin American Sea Turtles), a turtle conservation association. Their mission is simple: to get the nesting turtles to the open sea safely before the poachers do, and to engage in scientific research. Within the first few weeks of the project, the team has already collected valuable data on the nesting habits and behavior of the leatherback turtles.

**The Support of Visitors**

As the project progresses, tourists and travelers are being encouraged to participate in the conservation effort. Through a unique partnership with Biosphere Expeditions, visitors are invited to join the nightly patrols and witness the turtles laying their eggs in the sand. These patrols are not only critical for the conservation effort but also provide an unforgettable experience for participants.

**The Value of Citizen Science**

Citizen science is an increasingly important tool in wildlife conservation. By engaging the public in the monitoring and protection of marine life, organizations like LAST and Biosphere Expeditions can gather valuable data that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to collect. This data is crucial for understanding the threats facing sea turtles and developing effective conservation strategies.

**The Future of Sea Turtle Conservation**

As the leatherback turtle population continues to rise, there is hope for the future of these magnificent creatures. However, the challenges facing sea turtles are many and varied. It will take the efforts of many individuals, from scientists and conservationists to travelers and local communities, to ensure the continued protection of these wonderful creatures. With the support of the public and ongoing research, there is hope for the future of the leatherback turtle and other species of sea turtles around the world.

**The Good Fight**

Despite the efforts of NGOs such as Biosphere Expeditions and LAST, poaching remains a serious threat to sea turtles. However, through citizen science and community involvement, these organizations are working to turn the tide against poaching and save these fascinating creatures for future generations.