

Outside mag reporter says Mexico's lab to save turtles a farce

By KATHLEEN MONJE
Of the Emerald

Each fall, thousands of 80-pound female Pacific Ridley turtles join together in the nesting season — they swim ashore on the coast of western Mexico to lay their eggs.

Traditionally, the nesting season has provided the people of Escobilla, 200 miles south of Acapulco, with income from the sale of meat and leather. Because most of the slaughtered turtles are fertile females, the species has become endangered.

When the Mexican government enacted rules and quotas in an effort to protect the turtles, local fishermen complained. They convinced a Mexican court to lift the government ban on hunting the females during the arribazon, or nesting season.

Part of the justification for lifting the ban was the promise of a new laboratory in Escobilla, designed to collect and hatch eggs from the slaughtered female turtles. Antonio Suarez, who owns the Escobilla slaughterhouse, contributed much of the money for building the lab and hired biologists and technicians to supervise the rescue operation.

When Outside Magazine's investigative reporter, Tom Cahill, arrived in Escobilla for the lab's dedication ceremony, he told the Emerald he expected to write "an upbeat story — something about Suarez' enlightened self-interest, somebody doing something good."

Oaxaca's provincial governor presided over the dedication ceremony. Mexican journalists, including a television crew, covered the opening.

The guests at the ceremony saw tanks of baby turtles waiting to be put in the ocean, eggs taken from slaughtered female turtles put in sand for hatching and full-grown females in large tanks, Cahill said. It looked like a sound operation, geared to save the large amphibians.

Because Cahill's command of Spanish is "pretty poor," he decided to return to the lab a day or two later to talk to the biologist in charge.

What he found appalled him. "The lab was totally deserted — baby turtles had been left to die. The staff was gone, back working in the slaughterhouse," Cahill said. "The whole thing had been a sideshow."

Cahill and people working for

him spent most of October waiting for the arribazon. He camped on the beach every night, waiting for the female turtles to come out of the surf to lay their eggs.

On one night that seemed perfect for the arribazon — mild

weather, a wind blowing from the ocean to shore, and the moon in its last quarter — Cahill sat at a campfire with the Mexican biologist, waiting.

The evening wore on, with no sign of the turtles. Finally the

biologist said, "If you want to see the arribazon, go to the city dump." Cahill went to the dump the next morning.

"You could smell it before you got there," Cahill said. "I spent about twenty minutes taking pictures and retching."

He found turtle bodies piled four and five deep, rotting in the sun. Vultures and flies swarmed over the bodies.

"There was an immense pile of eggs — the next generation — covered with maggots and flies. Hot air rising from the decaying bodies blew over me; the whole scene felt incredibly evil," Cahill said.

"What I saw in Mexico was the extinction of an entire species, through greed," he said. "The lab was totally phony."

Cahill's story about the turtles is in the February issue of Outside Magazine, is on the newstands until Feb. 28. He suggests writing the president of Mexico, Jose Louis Portillo, at the National Palace, Mexico City, Mexico, as a counter measure to the slaughter.

"The Mexican government has done a good job of protecting turtles on its eastern coast," Cahill said. "Any letters to Portillo should be respectful — angry letters would be counter-productive."



Semester system may be on its way

By GARY LEY
Of the Emerald

If you know someone attending a university on the semester system, no doubt you envy them when May and June roll around. For while you're sweating in a

classroom, listening to a professor drone on, they're out playing tennis or sucking a beer on a beach, having left school five or six weeks before.

The early completion date is just one advantage of the early

semester system, which sees classes start in the last week of August and finish in early May.

In addition, registration and finals are endured two times a year instead of three. This not only saves on distress for students, but also on money and administrative work for the university.

It's no surprise then that so many colleges and universities are turning to the semester plan. A survey last year of 2,500 higher education institutions in the country, show 48 percent of the schools polled using semesters rather than quarters.

The quarter system — which is used by the state system of higher education — is used by 24 percent of the schools in the survey.

While the University has no imminent plans for conversion to the semester format, University President William Boyd feels it won't be too long before all schools in the state system alter their calendar.

"I suspect all of us (schools in the state system) will have made the change within ten years," Boyd says.

Boyd points out that in a survey last year, the faculty voted in favor of the semester system by a narrow margin. Even though the vote was positive, Boyd says he didn't go ahead with the switch because

of concerns expressed to him by community college administrators.

"They said that if the change was made at that time it would reduce by a significant margin the flow of their students to the University," Boyd says.

"I regretted not going ahead with the change. I have a personal preference for the semester system. It's more civilized. The pace is better, it's less frenetic than the quarter system," the president says.

Boyd also says the University could save money, energy and administrative work.

"Besides, by the time May comes around, nobody really wants to be in school," Boyd says.

A survey was also taken last year to determine student opinion on the semester system.

Cathy Tearnen, Student University Affairs Board President, says students were evenly divided on the issue. She doesn't feel there is a need for a change.

"If nobody wants to change, why do it?" she asks.

Tearnen thinks the biggest drawback to a switch to the semester system would be the transition period.

"It would be really awkward for a lot of students," she says.

University physicists given grant

The National Science Foundation has awarded the University \$166,000 for research on neutron physics.

The two-year grant will be used to support the research of three physics department faculty members and several graduate students who are working with the University Van de Graaff accelerator — capable of accelerating protons to energies of five million electron volts (MeV).

The three faculty members involved in the research are Harlan Lefevre, Jack Overley and Paul Ingalls.

Lefevre's work includes studying characteristics of neutrons released during nuclear reactions. The reactions occur after protons are shot at a certain speed into metal foil by the accelerator. Once a proton is captured by an atom in the foil, a neutron is released by the atom.

Overley's work involves studying the distribution of certain kinds of atoms located slightly below the surface of solids. All solids are nearly transparent to the accelerator's proton beam for depths up to a small fraction of a millimeter. Nuclear reactions which occur as the proton beam penetrates the surface of a solid can signal the depth at which they occur by emitting neutrons at particular speeds.

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