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Encounter At Escobilla

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During the last week of September, 12 people convened at Puerto Angel, Oaxaca, Mexico, where PIOSA (Pesquería Industrial de Oaxaca, S.A.), the company known for its massive harvesting of the *golfinia* (olive ridley; *Lepidochelys olivacea*), has its slaughterhouse and packing plant, and a small laboratory building. Puerto Angel is a half-hour jeep drive from Escobilla, the site of a huge nesting aggregation or *arribada*, known locally as *morriña* of *Lepidochelys*, and a place made known to the world by Tim Cahill in a sensational article in Outside Magazine as the scene of intemperate exploitation (see Marine Turtle Newsletter No. 7, 1978).

The group assembled at the invitation of Sr. Antonio Suárez, G., founder and owner of PIOSA. His motive was to establish communication with serious opponents of his exploitation of sea turtles, especially the *golfinia*. The group was comprised of the following: George Balazs, Archie Carr, Tim Clabaugh, Kim Clifton, David Ehrenfeld, Richard Felger,

Angie McGehee, Carlos Nagel, Peter Pritchard, Georgita Ruiz, Laura Tanglely and Jack Woody. All the participants paid their own travel expenses to Mexico City. From there on they were the guests of PIOSA, and all activities were arranged and attended by Sr. Suárez and his assistant Sr. Alfredo Martinez. The schedule was as follows:

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|----------------------------|---|
| 25 Sept. '79
Tues. P.M. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Arrival of participants in Mexico City2. Showing of movie on industrialization of Mexican sea turtles3. Dinner in Mexico City |
| 26 Sept. '79
Wed. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Travel to Oaxaca and Puerto Angel2. Visit to Escobilla Beach3. Visit to PIOSA laboratory4. Visit to PIOSA slaughterhouse |
| 27 Sept. '79
Thurs. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Boat trip along coastline off Escobilla, where thousands of ridleys were strung out for 8 km in a longshore <i>morriña</i>2. Historical sketch by Sr. Suárez3. Arrival of editors of magazine DUMAC4. Night trip to Escobilla to watch for <i>morriña</i> emergence, which failed to materialize; only 6 turtles nested |
| 28 Sept. '79
Fri. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Return by some participants to research facility and slaughterhouse |

2. Departure DUMAC editors
3. Meetings with Sr. Suárez

29 Sept. '79
Sat.

1. Return to Oaxaca
2. Return to Mexico City
3. Dinner at Suárez residence

30 Sept. '79
Sun.

1. Dispersal of participants

After many hours of meetings with and without Sr. Suárez in attendance the participants expressed continuing doubt that the sea turtles of Mexico can withstand the current level of harvest. It was clear that Sr. Suárez believed otherwise, but it was hoped that this disagreement would not bar further discussion. A final meeting was held to see whether any principles could be agreed on. The points on which agreement seemed possible, together with Sr. Suárez's reaction to each, were as follows:

1. A conference to instigate conservation of *L. olivacea* in an integrated way in the East Pacific was proposed. This would involve the principal countries with large ridley populations: Mexico, Costa Rica and Ecuador. Suárez: Agreed.
2. The need to maintain an outside observer in future seasons at Puerto Angel and Escobilia was pointed out; and gratitude was expressed for the PIOSA money that

supported Tim Clabaugh's work in that role during the past season. Future funding should be negotiated. Suárez: Agreed.

3. The need for careful study of migratory patterns of the East Pacific ridley, as grounding for conservation and management, was emphasized, and a substantial tagging program in Ecuador was recommended. Suárez: Agreed.
4. Re beach patrols: in spite of the policy of total protection, enforcement by PESCA (Instituto Nacional de Pesca) had become lax and in some cases the marines assigned to the work had not been effective. It was hoped that Sr. Suárez would use his influence to improve the situation. Suárez: I don't know what the status of protection is now - I'll explore it further. We are paying \$1000 per month for each group of marines - we want them to be effective. It is difficult to stop all illegal commerce, but, really, I feel that this is not heavy in Oaxaca.
5. It was suggested that in the absence of a reliable population model, another technique to monitor population status, censusing nesting turtles annually, should be used. As a temporary rule-of-thumb, the morriña of a given year is down 20%, a moratorium should be declared; if it is down 10%, the harvest would be reduced by 50%. Suárez: Because of socio-economic and political factors such a process must come about gradually. I table the proposition, although I agree that any reduction would indeed be a cause for concern. Probably, if we should experience a clearly serious decline we would try to establish a moratorium, and to continue it until recovery.
6. Sr. Suárez's support for a program of national beach reserves, with formal protection of beaches and the coastal zone behind them, was requested. Suárez: It's an old idea, and nothing has been done about it. We should do it gradually, starting with the beaches only.
7. It was pointed out that several joint, informal U.S. - Mexican sea turtle projects are afoot, and Suárez's support in formalizing and reinforcing these was asked. Suárez: This

is official business, at government level. It is my personal opinion, however, that if our relations here continue in a healthy way, such an advance is entirely possible.

Two features of our 4 days with Antonio Suárez were especially impressive. One was his unstinting hospitality. He is a man of vast energy. The round of inspection and sightseeing that he had organized was so continuously unflagging that it seemed for a while that he was purposely wearing us down as adversaries. As it turned out, however, this could hardly have been the case, because the feverish schedule continued unabated after all the negotiations were over. Another strong impression that we took away was that there was a curious lack of window-dressing. Some tidying had been done, especially at the laboratory, where, incidentally not much research seemed to be underway; and the Slaughter session arranged was a mere demonstration of technique, with little of the shock power of the routine mass carnage. Otherwise, there was a surprising lack of effort to conceal the more unhappy aspects of an operation in which turtles are caught, landed, killed and dismembered by the tens of thousands.

The meetings at Puerto Angel were briefly attended by 2 members of the editorial staff of the Mexican magazine DUMAC, the bimonthly publication of Ducks Unlimited, in which a translation of Tim Cahill's *The Shame of Escobilla* had just appeared. Antonio Suarez had invited the editors down from Monterrey on the grounds that, even though Ducks Unlimited is mainly concerned with game birds, its membership is made up of prosperous, leisured people who are strongly opposed to environmental loss in Mexico. An article on the Puerto Angel meetings will appear in the next issue of DUMAC. What its tone will be remains to be seen. Certainly DUMAC subscribes to the sustained-harvest concept, which constituted the main bone of contention between PIOSA and its conceptual adversaries at the meeting.

However, the sincerity of Sr. Suárez's belief that DUMAC is the most substantial hope for conservation in Mexico cannot be doubted.

Besides the hours of group discussions, I had protracted private conversations with our host. During these I told him of my view that the controlling issue was not whether he may be returning significant numbers of hatchlings to the sea, in his oviducal salvage program; but rather that, since the 1960's, when the olive ridley became a theme for concern at meetings of the IUCN Marine Turtle Group, 3 and perhaps 4 *arribadas* of about the size of that at Escobilla had been destroyed. His reply to that was that it was just that kind of irresponsibility that he was preventing, by his disciplined exploitation and management. Then, I told him, that I personally opposed all international traffic in sea turtle products, and that the rapid spread of a brand new turtle leather industry since 1967 is an example of the ills that such traffic generates. Sr. Suárez replied that now it is precisely because of the growth of this profitable industry that he has exerted his influence in stopping the heedless destruction of the resource and in disciplining the fishery; and that if his two principles of operation: *explotación racional*, and *industrialización completa* are adhered to, the fishery can be stabilized and perpetuated. Otherwise, he said, effective management of East Pacific ridleys would quickly disintegrate. In a concluding statement at the last group session, Sr. Suárez repeated a remark that he had made several times before. It was this: "I will not go down in the history of Oaxaca as a person who has contributed to the decline of sea turtles; this would be one of the worst inheritances that I could leave for my daughter."