

## The Turtle Walks

Around 9:45 p.m. I start getting ready for my work day. I make sure I have comfortable shorts, shirt and shoes. I strap on a hip pack full of, pit tags, pit tag inserter, cotton balls and alcohol; and I put on the turtle vest holding, the pit tag verifier, field notebooks, nest markers, measuring tape, spray paint, and an moto tool. On my way out I roll a die to decide what path I will be taking around the island, put on a hat (to protect myself from overly protective mothers) and falling crap) grab calipers in one hand a flashlight in the other and out into the dark night I go.

I cover the entire island, walking the water line of each beach dodging sleeping monk seals while looking for turtle tracks in the sand. Once I see the tracks, I quietly follow them so that I can sneak up behind the huge turtle that made the tractor like markings in the sand. With a dimmed light I look at her carapace to see if she has been moto tooled with a number. If she has a number I record who she is, where she is at and what she is doing then I check out what else she needs (any measurements that still need to be taken, a tumor check, pit tag insertions or verification..). If she has no number I assign her one, moto tool it on her carapace, spray paint over it and then continue with all that is listed above.

When I see a turtle up at night she will be executing one of the following behaviors

- 1.crawling to or from the water.
- 2.Digging a body pit: when doing this the turtle use all of her flippers to dig a shallow pit in which she fits her body in before she starts digging an egg chamber. While digging she typically shifts her body around the pit and looks as though she has a lot of energy. Sometimes turtles will come up at night and only dig body pits; a big wast of energy if you ask me.
- 3.Digging an egg chamber: This is the chamber in which the eggs will be placed. The turtle

only uses her hind flippers to carefully scoop out sand to make this cylindrical hole. This is really cool to see; It is amazing how precise they are with their digging.

- 4.Laying eggs; This is the most fascinating thing to see, perfectly round, white, golf ball sized eggs being dropped into their refined little egg chamber. When I see this first, I get all excited then I mark the nest by dropping this plastic ball with a wire attached to it directly into the nest. After the nest is marked if I have time I will continue to lie with the turtle and watch this miracle of life.
- 5.Patty caking; after the eggs are laid, the turtle will gently fill the egg chamber with sand and then "patty cakes" the top with her hind flippers until the sand is firm. This is very cute.
- 6.Backfilling; after the eggs are covered the turtle does a thorough job at covering the entire nest with sand by vigorously tossing sand over it with her front flippers. I need to be careful not to be directly in back because it's hard to dodge flying rocks in the dark!!

I take five walks a night, the last one beginning at 6:00 am. Each walk takes about 45 min. I see a magnificent sun rise and sun set every day; lately I have been witnessing the moon set and rise too. I feel lucky that instead of working under the scorching hot sun I get to work under the shimmering star lit sky. I have been seeing on the average six falling stars a night and at the end of the six o'clock I see the sky catch on fire as the sun appears for the first time that day.

I feel like a true turtle woman here, working with the nesting giants at night and during the day digging up hatched pits to gather data and save the trapped little turtle hatchlings. I love these dinky guys all cute and sleepy eyed with sand caked all over them. Once I am sure I have gotten the last of them I put them in a bucket to await their evening release. Each time I set these precious creatures free I get a pit in my stomach because I know that their chance for survival is not good, in fact only about one out of one thousand actually make it to reproductive maturity, which is not hard to believe when you see them, they are so tiny and fragile; Just like a little saltine cracker for all those big fish in the sea.