



The Little Turtles

by Ezekiel Griego
as told to Sallie Luther

"There's one!" I whispered to my friends. We plopped down on the warm sand and kept very still. The sea turtle began to lay her eggs. Our sacks were empty and we all wanted this turtle's eggs — not to eat them but to save them.

My name is Ezekiel and I'm a Nauhautl (na-wa-TAHL) Indian. I live in the village of Maruata on the Pacific coast of Mexico. My friends and I call ourselves *Las Tortugitas* (tohr-too-GHEE-tahs). That means "the little turtles" in Spanish.

Why are we on the beach tonight? We are helping an American scientist named Kim Clifton save the sea turtles that nest here. You see, people have killed off many of the world's sea turtles. But Kim has come up with a plan to help keep the turtles from dying out.

First we spot where the turtles lay their eggs. Then we dig the eggs up and bury them in a special "turtle corral" at our village. When the eggs hatch, we carry the baby turtles down to the sea in buckets.

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Each year we watch the sea turtles return to our beach in Mexico. Many of them hatched here and have come back to lay their own eggs. Then they disappear once more into the dark sea. It always makes me a little sad to say *adios* for another year.



That way crabs, gulls, raccoons, and other natural enemies can't get them.

In the wild, only about one baby turtle in a hundred makes it from its nest to the ocean just a few yards away. But our way gives many more baby turtles a chance to grow into adults. We're just giving nature a helping hand!

Tonight's work is a little more dangerous than usual, for we aren't the only ones hunting turtles. Poachers are out here too. These people will kill every turtle they find for its skin, meat, and eggs. If the poachers aren't stopped, there soon won't be a single sea turtle left.

The turtle we were watching was a small Pacific Ridley. It took her about half an hour to finish laying her eggs, cover up her nest, and head slowly back to the sea. Now it was *our* turn to go to work!

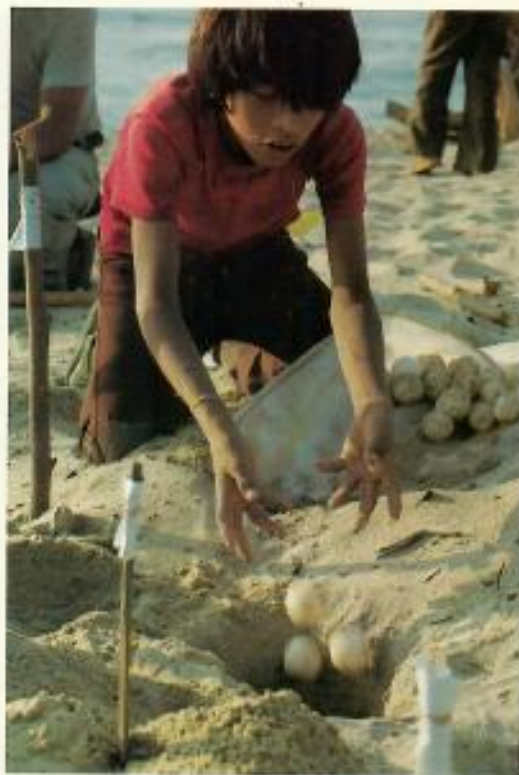
My friend Jerrez ran to dig up the nest. "Seventy-eight eggs," he announced as he put the last one into my sack. We hurried on down the beach. Then our flashlights picked up the glint of eyes shining in the dark. We stopped in our tracks. *Please turn the page*





Photo by George H. Balazs

I grab the leathery turtle eggs we have found and plunk them into the warm sand. Now we can relax, for our corral is full of the nests we have made and marked with sticks. All we do now is wait for the little ones to hatch. We are happy because the work we are doing is helping to save sea turtles.



It was a farmer's pig, rooting for tasty eggs. We waved our arms at the nest bandit and drove it away. Between the hungry animals and the terrible poachers, the turtles' eggs are taken almost faster than the turtles can lay them.

By dawn our egg hunt was over. We had patrolled our five miles (8 km) of beach all night. We had seen many green sea turtles nesting, plus a few Pacific Ridleys. There had even been a giant leatherback. She was so big she looked like a boulder with flippers!

Kim was waiting for us back at the turtle corral. "Bueno!" he greeted us. "Good work! Let's get those eggs back in the sand, before they cool off too much!"

When we first started working for Kim, many of our eggs never hatched. Then we found out that most sea turtles make their nests about 18 inches (45 cm) deep.

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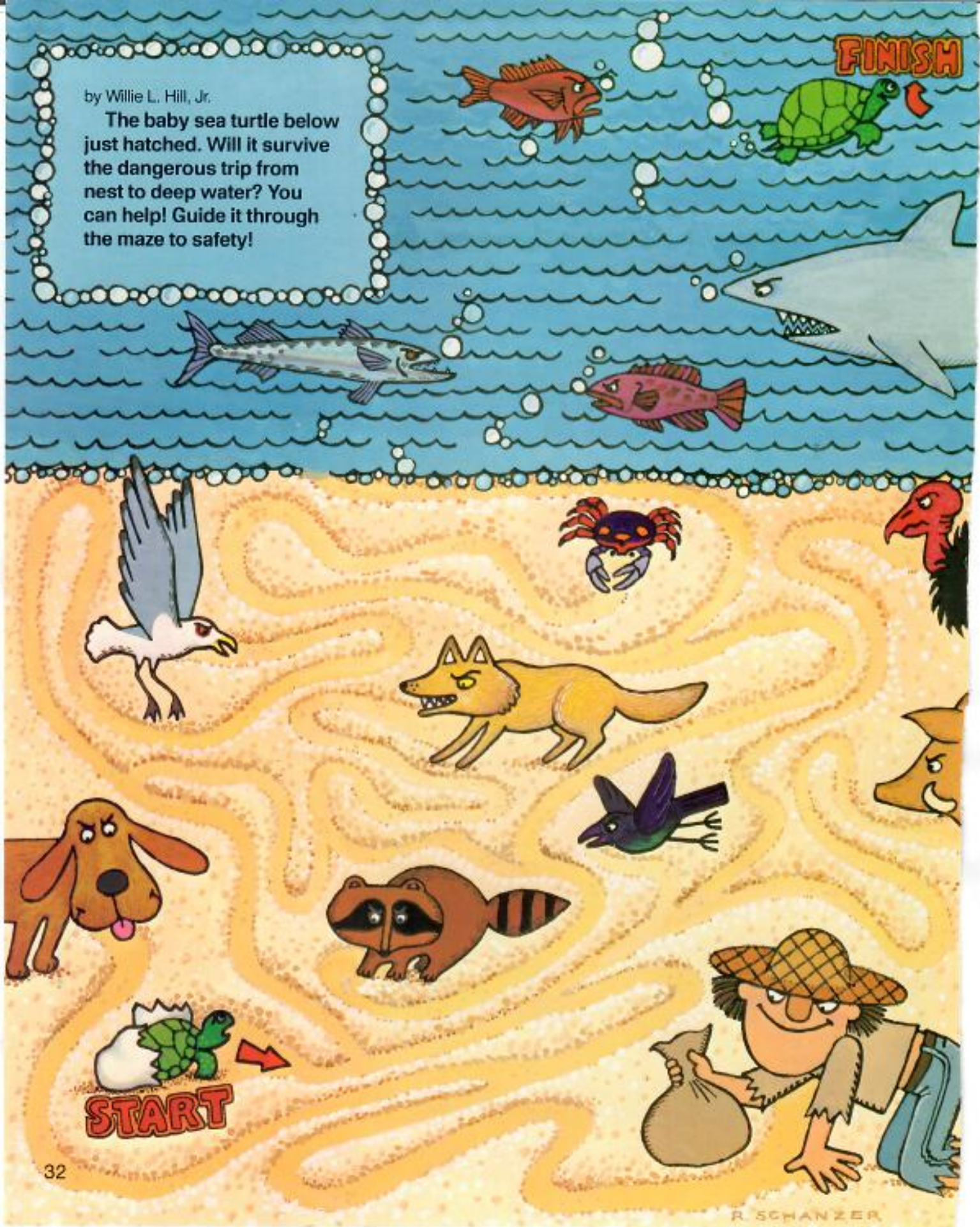




by Willie L. Hill, Jr.

The baby sea turtle below just hatched. Will it survive the dangerous trip from nest to deep water? You can help! Guide it through the maze to safety!

FINISH



If the holes are any deeper, the eggs don't get enough warmth from the sun to hatch. But if the holes aren't deep enough, the hot sand cooks the turtles inside their shells. Audel is our best nest-digger. His arms are just the right length!

This morning as I was plopping some eggs into a nest, Valentino came up behind me. "Be careful!" he warned me. "You'll break the eggs!"

"It's okay," I laughed. "Fresh sea turtle eggs have leathery shells. They don't break the way hens' eggs do."

Napoleon and Chiliki had already buried all their eggs, so they helped me mark the nests. Each marker showed what kind of turtle's eggs were in each nest, how many there were (usually about a hundred), and when the eggs had been collected.

Sea turtle eggs hatch in about two months. So we just count up the days and keep an eye out for the babies. But it's not as easy as it sounds.

There are hundreds of nests in our turtle corral — and thousands of eggs. Some

nights nothing happens at all. Other nights hundreds of eggs hatch at once. Then we have to run around like crazy, scooping up all the babies and putting them in our buckets. You wouldn't believe how fast those little guys can crawl!

Audel says his favorite part of the whole project is letting the turtles go. "When I put my bucket down at the ocean's edge, those little turtles scramble all over each other to get out. They're just a few minutes old — but they seem to know how important it is to get to that water."

Mis amigos — my friends — and I are all very, very proud of the work we are doing. Kim calls us his "guiding lights." He says that without our help, his project couldn't go on.

One morning he told us something I'll always remember: He said that every time we set a bucket of baby turtles free in the ocean, we are giving a special gift back to our planet. We are helping to save endangered animals from extinction. Boy, did that make us proud! *The End*



As Ridley turtles begin to hatch, I hurry to catch them and put them in my bucket. Then we carry them to the sea. We help them past the dangers on the beach, but they're on their own in the water. Buena suerte, tortugita — good luck, little turtle!