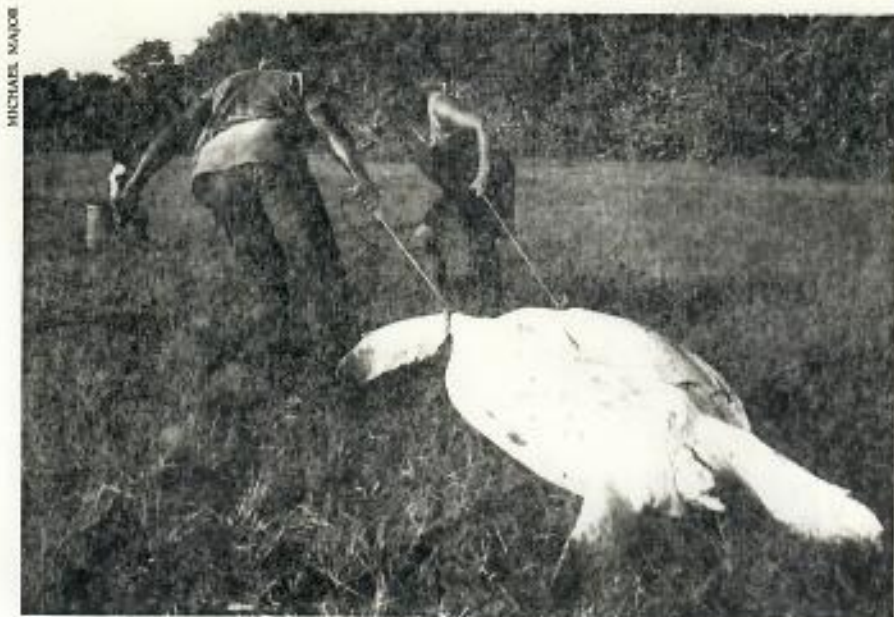


## EARTH-WATCH

## Foiling the Pantera Negra

ARCHIE CARR III



Butchering a green turtle at Tortuguero: a great place for throat-cutting.

FOR A WHILE in Costa Rica there was a man who wanted to kill me. My friends at Tortuguero told me of the threat. They said the man was called the Pantera Negra. The Black Panther. It was a spooky name and a spooky threat, given that my friends heard about it more or less as street talk: "Dat white boy at Tortuguero? De Pantera Negra say he goin' to kill him, mon. Goin' cut him t'roat."

He never got me, though. So far as I know he never even tried, and I admit I watched for him for a year or so whenever I had to go to Puerto Limón. I looked for him in the crowded market where fresh turtle was sold. A great place for throat-cutting, with all the noise.

My first encounter with the Pantera Negra had been friendly. He was a good-natured fellow; big, intelligent, and calm. It wasn't until a few hours later that things got unruly.

The Pantera didn't know it, but I was predisposed to like him. At eighteen, I liked just about everybody I met on the coast of Costa Rica. It was my fantasy land, and as far as I was concerned I was a privileged observer.

I didn't just happen upon that sliver of the Caribbean: I wanted to be there very badly. My father, a biologist, first took me there when I was twelve to

reconnoiter for sea turtles. We found turtles, all right. More green turtles nest at Tortuguero than anywhere else in the Caribbean, and my father began a research project there in 1957 that has continued to this day. His career and my adolescence were nurtured by tagging sea turtles at Tortuguero. So was the survival outlook of the turtles. Costa Rica agreed to protect them by law from commercial taking, then declared the area a national park. The migration, ecology, and behavior of Tortuguero's turtles are better known than those of any other sea turtles in the world.

Turtle tagging is a procedure, part of a scientific methodology. But there is more to life than procedure, and for many of us who worked on the beach the turtle project became very personal and the surroundings very involving. For us it was inevitable that intervention and participation in life on the coast should take a seat alongside fascinated but passive observation. For one thing we had, at our Green Turtle Station, the only medicine chest for miles around. We administered first aid. That's intervention. We employed some local people. That's intervention.

But my intervention in the case of the Pantera Negra was far more aggressive. He threatened the turtles themselves, the very essence of Tortuguero. And

with them he threatened my mental construct of the place.

The Tortuguero beach is twenty-two miles long, bound at either end by a river mouth. We usually confined our turtle tagging to the first five miles, from the mouth end, mile-0 at Tortuguero River, down to mile-5. Gathering enough people and gear to tag every nesting turtle during one night on the rest of the beach—from mile-5 to the Parismina River, seventeen miles beyond—was tough and expensive, so we only did it occasionally each season. We wanted to get more accurate figures on nest density and predation, to determine the rate of spillover of turtles we had already tagged on the first five miles, and of course, to tag more turtles.

On one of these nights, late in August, I met up with the Pantera Negra. There were three hundred nesting turtles on the beach that night. He would try to kill ten percent of them.

It took three days to get ready for the big beach walk. The scheme was to distribute workers along the coast at about two-mile intervals. They had to be in place by nightfall, when the turtles started crawling. The workers would tag the turtles or turn them over, leaving them to be tagged in the morning. Turtles would be turned or tagged only after they had completed nesting. Since a green turtle may take two hours to complete her entire nesting process, it is often necessary to monitor several turtles at once, walking back and forth between them, checking their progress, waiting until the eggs are dropped and the nest covered before clamping a tag on a flipper.

My own mission was to coordinate all the activities from horseback, helping with the turtle turning, distributing tags to needy sections of the beach, boosting morale among the isolated turners, and finally, beginning at dawn, trekking back along the entire beach to release any turtle that had been overlooked during a night that promised great confusion.

It was a terrific plan. It was all my own, and I confess that I saw myself as someone approaching grand marshal of the beach. Everybody else was excited, too: In the tropics, any complicated

plan that has a chance of working is worth celebrating.

Harse, the horse that was to carry me down the beach, was the property of Leo Martinez, one of our oldest friends and helpers at Tortuguero. Harse was the only horse there at the time. He was a razorback stallion with a bent ear and an assortment of scars, the marks of a hard life on the coast hauling coconuts and copra. Harse was fit enough, but his backbone looked like a two-by-four stuffed under his skin. He was tied to a coconut tree, one rear leg cocked forward, head drooped, eyes veiled sullenly, crusted blood from his nightly donation to the vampire bat still plastered to his lower neck. Leo assured me the ride would be fine and tossed some stuffed and flattened flour sacks across the wood-frame saddle he had made, patting the padding to show me its cushioning promise.

Leo squeezed Harse's head into a hemp halter while I put my straw saddlebags, bulging with food, flashlights, and other odds and ends, across the horse's butt, rethringing them to the innumerable wooden projections on the saddle. I rearranged the saddle pads into a tolerable seat and guided Harse down to the wet, dense sand near the surf. We turned south toward Jalova, near the Parismina, and tumbled into the haze sweeping in off the tumbling waves.

**T**HE WEATHER WAS FAIR, and if it held there would be one less annoyance for everyone involved in the beach walk. Rainy-season rain at Tortuguero does not just wet your body, soak your notebook, ruin your flashlight. Borne across half the Atlantic by the trade winds, it can fall in such unrelenting, inescapable torrents that you begin to feel tormented, chosen, seemingly persecuted by the falling water. It rains up to eighteen feet each year at Tortuguero.

The rains were passing, though, and that was good for Harse and me and the twelve other people who would be tagging turtles that night. The early afternoon sun warmed my head through my straw hat, and rocked by the slowly walking horse, I felt a pleasant somnolence. I began to look forward to a good ride, arriving at the far end of the beach in time to start the nighttime patrolling.

But Tortuguero is ruthless with optimists. Harse collapsed. He went to his knees in the sand not two miles from the village. As his rear end gradually settled, I found myself standing on the beach with the wiry brown horse folded up between my legs. To carry on, I

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would just have to walk all twenty miles of beach on foot. And then walk back again. I began to curse.

Harse wasn't hurt; he was just taking charge. Leo had warned me: "Dis harse, him sort of a rank, Chuck. He a stallion, you know. I should have cut him, but then . . . We soon to bring up de mare from Parismina. No, you must beat dis harse, Chuck. If you beat him, he take you where you want to go." But I cannot beat a horse the way Leo beats a horse. It's more like clubbing. Tortuguero horses are broken to the club. I tried to break one gently once, a granddaughter of Harse's. I cracked two ribs when she threw me.

After I stepped clear of the pack saddle, Harse promptly rose to his feet. Dubiously, I checked him for trauma. His breathing was soft and easy. His eyes were clear, and I could see evil lurking there as before. There was nothing wrong with Harse; he just wanted to end the trip.

Raving on the windy, lonesome beach, I set out toward the south, pulling Harse behind me. I pulled him all the way to Jalova.

I walked for two or three hours. Destination coalesced from the haze ahead. The past disarticulated behind. Sound

was washed out by the steady thunder from the sea. I fought it for a while; I fought to hear the fine details of the tanagers' duets in the brush. But the details were lost to the surf, and I quit fighting.

Under such circumstances, it is surprising that I saw the Pantera Negra at all. He and his partner were at first only tiny dots settling out of the troubled air ahead. I took them to be a pair from my own group.

When they saw me, I don't know. They made no sign. As the distance lessened, I saw they were strangers. They were building a camp, odd behavior for mile-12. Nevertheless, our first meeting was pleasant, any tension lost in the customary cordiality of the coast. The big, self-confident black man chatted amicably, explaining that he and his helper were en route to Tortuguero, having hitched a ride by boat up the lagoons from Limón. They would start out again at dawn.

The Latino sidekick, a wormy character who looked out of place in the wilderness, remained quiet and insecure despite his machete. The towering black man was gentle with him, urging him through the final steps of erecting their plastic tarpaulin.



"I made three life lists this morning."

I had no suspicions of the two, even though there were suspicious signs from the outset. Why pitch camp now? Sunset was an hour away. Walking is good at night, and there was nothing to be gained by sleeping on the beach. But as I have said, I was predisposed to like the Pantera Negra, so I accepted his tale. The Pantera even asked me if the Guardia Rural, the cops of the countryside, were part of our tagging operation. It was hours before I saw anything peculiar in the question.

Shortly after dark I reached Jalova, where I would turn around and head back to Tortuguero.

I left old Harse tethered, relieving myself of him for the rest of the night. Harse was in for a night of gluttonous pleasure. Jalova—derived from "Haul Over"—is a freshwater bay in the main river system that protrudes right into the side of the ocean beach. Tallgrass grows there, and Harse found contentment in the grazing and drinking.

I began my return, tagging as I went. In due course I passed the Pantera Negra. I did not see him or his partner, but there were a lot of turned turtles near the segment of beach where I had left them that afternoon. Still clinging to the Pantera's innocent story, I judged the turning to be the work of my team members.

I found Leo and his partner, Michek, a short time later, sitting on a log where mile-9 met mile-10. I hallooed them as I approached and found a seat on the log. We smoked and compared notes. Having tagged twenty-five turtles in relatively short order, I said I had a feeling it was going to be a big night.

Michek said he had never turned so many in a single night. A Miskito Indian, he had been a *velador*, a professional turner, back in the days when schooners would load up with green turtles from the beaches of Tortuguero. A *velador* staked out a mile of beach, turned every turtle that came ashore there, and when the schooners came along tied driftwood to their flippers and released them one by one. Swimming through the surf, the buoyed turtles were recovered by men in small boats working from the schooners.

Back then, before World War II, was the time of the turtle. Our work—my father's work—was to save them from extinction. In the days of the *velador*, it was said that you might walk a mile stepping from the back of one turtle to another.

Now, here was Michek talking. Michek the Miskito, the old *velador* from the tribe of the turtle people. Not in his whole life had Michek turned so many turtles on a single mile in a single night.

It was a historic moment at Tortuguero, and I felt it powerfully and joyfully there on my log with these two dark men, staring into the nighttime surf.

I told Leo about the two strangers camped on the beach. He quickly concluded that they were poachers and warned me against aggravating them. Then the three of us split up, Michek and Leo bound for Tortuguero. Forty-five minutes later I encountered the Pantera Negra in the dark, and any doubt I still had vanished.

He and his partner were sitting on a log on the beach. The flapping of overturned turtles up and down the beach could be heard over the steady roar of the surf. I approached the men and said hello. They were very relaxed, and we talked about the night and the turtles. When I asked, the Pantera Negra said they had captured "thirty head" of turtle.

His matter-of-fact attitude, and the number of doomed turtles, sent a surge of adrenalin through me the effects of which I was able to conceal only because it was dark. I promptly made my apologies and moved on into the night.

I walked rapidly now, counting fresh turtle tracks but no longer tagging. Dawn was fast approaching, and I had to make certain that all was clear at the south end of the beach before turning

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back for Tortuguero.

The Pantera Negra gave me energy. In two minutes I had learned of the fundamental schism between conservationist and commercial exploiter of wildlife. Their souls are in different galaxies. Thirty turtles climb out on a short stretch of beach. The Pantera's response: "Fantastic. I'll kill them." Mine: "Fantastic." Period. He wracked my values. Even at eighteen, I was partway up the ivory tower. The Pantera Negra was from Limón, where there is no room for abstractions. In Limón, something is fantastic if you can eat it or sell it or take it to bed. In the ivory tower, fantastic is an end in itself. No doubt I was a fool in his world just as he was in mine. But the law, although I had no authority to enforce it, was on my side.

At Jalova I mounted Harse again, and we struck out in a spirited gait. Visions of home put what passed for fire into his stride.

**A**T SUNUP I CONFRONTED the Pantera Negra and his partner. I pulled up two hundred yards from their field of activities. The big man was in a fury, up to his ankles in the surf waving his arms. His bellowing was muffled by the surf. Beyond the waves a

small motor launch was idling. Two dug-out cayucas were plying the sea parallel to the beach at the very limits of safety where the combers began to rise up to break on sandy shoals below. Periodically the boatmen sent vague hand signals. The Pantera Negra would rage in response, waving them south or north and cursing all the while.

It took a moment to comprehend the strange scene, but when I saw a large log surging inappropriately against the incoming waves, I suddenly understood. There was a buoyed turtle out there. It was just as Leo and his siblings, Shefton, Obid, and Miss Sibella, had told me on dark nights at Tortuguero: "Den de velador him tie de turtle fin to a large stick and him turn she loose right to de sea, and mens from de launch dey catch de turtle as soon she clear de surf."

The Pantera Negra was trying to direct the cayucas to intercept the hard-swimming turtle before she broke her tether or crossed the surf line and made for the open sea.

The Spanish assistant stood dumbfounded, machete hanging idly from his hand. Beyond the two men, I could see the yellow bellies of the rest of the Pantera's turtles: With one buoyed, there were twenty-nine still on the beach. It

struck me that if each turtle took as much time to load as this first one, the Pantera would be at his task for half a day.

I kicked Harse into motion. As I approached, the Pantera Negra glanced at me over his shoulder and returned to his arm-waving. The assistant, on my left, gave a shy wave. I nodded and rode by.

It all went fast after that. Fast and strange and lucky. The luck was that none of the Pantera's turtles had nested the night before. They were all fresh and strong, their energy saved from the two-hour labor of sand-digging and egg-pushing that nesting requires.

It was lucky, too, that the first of his turtles that I came upon was a big one for Tortuguero, forty-six to forty-eight inches long, which meant she weighed about three hundred pounds. I stopped next to her and leapt off Harse, immediately striking him with a thin stick. He trotted up the beach, saddlebags thumping against his flanks. It was the only thing Harse did right in his life.

I was now stranded on foot, committed to an aggressive act, and my pulse soared in response. I flipped the big turtle as though she were no weightier than a garbage-can top. She surged toward the sea with huge swipes of her fore-flippers. The Pantera Negra, realizing my intentions, made his move. I bolted toward the second turtle twenty yards away. I turned her and looked back. The Pantera had reached the first one. The big one. I turned a third turtle. The Pantera was fighting the big one. The Spanish man was not moving. He was confused. The Pantera looked to sea toward the boatmen, still trying to catch the buoyed turtle. He gave them a desperate hand signal. It was an error. The big turtle slipped the Pantera's grasp. She was at the wet apron of the surf and fought with new vigor. I flipped the fourth turtle. The big one had the best of the Pantera. She thrashed with frightful violence in the wash of the first wave, the Pantera clinging frantically to her flipper. The longer she held him off, the closer her freed sisters could get to safety. They were all racing. I flipped and ran and flipped and ran. I now had a hundred-yard lead on the Pantera Negra and knew my own life was preserved. I concentrated on efficiency: on perfect strides, perfect grips, and perfect heaves. I was a machine.

By the time the big turtle broke loose from the Pantera Negra for the last time, the rest of the turtles were totally out of his reach. I glanced at him once. He was waving his arms at me and then his boatmen and stamping his feet.

Harse was a half-mile ahead, still trotting. I trotted after him, choking on tears, gasping for air, terrified, exhilarated, and vindicated.

I ran down the homeward-bound stallion in about a mile. When he noticed I was catching up, he lowered his ears menacingly but did not increase his speed. Nor did he stop, of course.

I grabbed his reins and stood a moment, breathing, leaning on Harse, looking back down the beach. The turtle men were not to be seen. The motor launch was a small speck, still not under way after the morning's disaster.

There wasn't time to reflect just now. The sun was hot. It was almost eight o'clock and Michek's turtles were still on the beach. I pulled Harse to a stop near the first one and gazed down the mile stretch at the others. In the now-white light of the sun, the vision struck me a sudden blow of dread. Every animal was hot and flapping madly, flippers slapping belly plate in bursts of clapping.

It was a wild scene. An exercised turtle is hard to grasp properly. With a bad grip you stand to drop the flipper just at the peak of the heave to turn it over. At that point you must put your full strength behind your push. That means slipping your feet close under the half-turned shell so your legs can help push. If you let go of the flipper then, the dead weight of the turtle falls back, the sharp edge of the hard carapace peeling your shins on the way. The released flipper immediately explodes with the power of a pelagic swimmer, and you are lucky to get away with a ruthless slap. If you are unlucky, the small claw halfway up the leading edge of the flipper slices your arm, leg, or back, and you catch a quart of sand, full force, in the face.

So even before I dismounted I figured I was going to get hurt. But my greatest fear was that I would kill the turtles. The beach walk was my grandiose plan. Now I was presented with sixty overheated animals and no help, and they would all die in another hour or two if I could not get them back to the sea.

I beat Harse, once again sending him trotting down the beach trail by himself. I stepped toward the first turtle into the powder-dry sand and discovered a nightmare. The sand was dry six inches down. The heat-soaked pumice was unbearable. To turn the turtle, I buried my feet, stabbing down with my toes and scraping awkwardly for the cooler sand below. I ran a mile over the sand and scraped at sixty stops and turned a crazed turtle at each one. I howled and cursed and wept in maniacal fury when I fell in a nest pit and the dry, searing



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wave of sand engulfed my body. I kept running until there were no more turtles, and then I sprinted for the sea and dove in.

The Tortuguero sand does not quite blister human skin. My feet and ankles were crimson, but the waves cooled them, and despite the violence of the sensation on the dry sand, the pain was instantly and completely relieved by the water.

I stood up and watched the turtles. Half were already safe, gone to the high seas. The rest were racing back to the surf energetically. Not one was overtaxed by the heat. They all made it, marching in a phalanx into the waves.

Harse had gained another half-mile on me. I had to catch him; my water was in the saddlebags. I ran after Harse in the sun, and by the time I caught him I felt like death was prospecting among my sinews. I pulled the horse up the beach to the edge of the forest, where a short but mature coconut tree was leaning out over the sand enticingly, like the thumb of a hitchhiker. I pulled down a couple of *pipas*, the local name for young coconuts, full of a light, almost carbonated fluid. I opened them with a machete and drank, and drank all the remaining tinned juices and one

whole canteen of water, too. I offered Harse a sip of water in a coconut half-shell, but he turned his head away.

In the shade of the little coconut, cooling my blood with freshwater, I decided the Pantera Negra had made a bad decision. He threw all his efforts into trying to recapture one specimen while I released his entire stock. He could have caught me or at least chased me away. After all, I had to stop for each turtle. He might have run me down and lost no more than two turtles, instead of twenty-nine.

At first I figured he was dumb. But you don't persuade a motor launch full of turtlemen to take a risk with you if you don't have some sort of reputation as a clever schemer.

He knew he was breaking the law but was unwilling to worsen his culpability. Some conflict with civilization made the Pantera Negra fight vainly with the big turtle while an overnight fortune floundered off to sea, released by a self-righteous gringo. I was in the right, and he acquiesced—heatedly, with great loss of face. His threat to kill me later gained him back some pride, but the man was civilized. The law, or better, morality, the intangible underpinnings of law, had been sustained out there on mile-12. ▲