



“The ocean cannot survive on the efforts of individual conservation projects alone. **Policy and economics** play a vital role, and states must work together—with each other, and with their citizens—to address the issues that afflict our waters.”

—Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, Minister of Environment and Energy, Costa Rica

## Costa Rica: Sea Turtles Forge the Policy Path of Marine Conservation

In 2004, a remarkable series of events took place in Costa Rica that has helped to dramatically improve the state of marine and terrestrial protection throughout the country and throughout the Central American region. The International Sea Turtle Society’s 24th Annual Sea Turtle Symposium was held in Costa Rica that year, and the turnout was outstanding, not only in its typical 1,000-strong attendance but also in the international and *local* attention it brought to the plight of sea turtles—particularly the Pacific leatherback—along Costa Rica’s coastlines. This attention, in turn, enhanced thousands of Costa Ricans’ consciousness of their own interrelationships with marine life.

Within two months of the Symposium’s conclusion, President Abel Pacheco had summoned a meeting of top officials from the Costa Rican Fishing Institute (INCOPECSA), marine conservationists and the country’s minister of environment and energy, Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, to end many years of uncertainty about which governmental body should administer marine conservation in Costa Rica. The verdict was quite clearly in favor of the environment, with the Ministry of Environment and Energy granted jurisdiction of management, conservation, and restoration of all marine and coastal-marine habitats and species therein; INCOPECSA was thereafter restricted to issues pertaining to fishing: permits and regulations, techniques, and statistical analysis of the industry.

Within another two months, President Pacheco publicly announced his intention to protect a full 25 percent of Costa Rica’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) within marine protected areas—a monumental achievement for marine conservation worldwide.

With the help of Costa Ricans’ heightening interest in sea turtles and marine conservation, and support from international NGOs, the government has made rapid progress in protecting Las Baulas National



Las Baulas National Park, Costa Rica. © STEPHEN NASH / CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Park (Marine Section), the most important remaining nesting ground of the eastern Pacific leatherback expanding its marine area, and vigorously consolidating the park’s terrestrial areas.

And the list of the country’s successful environmental policy-making goes on. Costa Rica continues to strengthen its conservation practices and set the example for its neighbors; the teamwork among conservationists, government officials, local media, and citizens in this country is a shining example for the rest of the world.

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