

LAS BAULAS NATIONAL MARINE PARK

An Enduring Hope

By ROTNEY PIEDRA

When I began working at Costa Rica's Las Baulas National Marine Park (*Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas*, or PNMB), first as a student in 1994 and then as park director in 1998, I was ready to commit myself to a life in conservation. By then, I had already heard the saying that "conservation is not an easy task" many times, and I would hear it many more.

But it was not until I began to experience the battles and frustrations of the work firsthand that I truly understood the meaning of those words. Looking back at my time here and the decades of conservation history at PNMB, I realize that countless lessons are to be learned, not only about this particular park, but also more broadly about the complex interplay of conservation and economic development that occurs in protected areas everywhere. In spite of the challenges we have faced, my colleagues and I remain committed to our cause, now more than ever.

In 1995, after years of work by biologists and community members, the PNMB was established through Costa Rican law in recognition of its importance to leatherback turtles. The park's boundaries extended along the coast to include several beaches—Playa Carbon, Playa Ventanas, Playa Grande, and Playa Langosta—and a 75-meter-wide (246-foot-wide) strip of land extending inland from the beaches, forming a 125-meter-wide (410-foot-wide) strip of protection. In addition to the beaches, the adjacent lands encompass mangrove estuaries as well as maritime forest and dry tropical forest habitats. The newly formed park also included some privately owned properties. This last category has caused bitter debate to this day, and the resolution of that debate will be a critical element in the future of PNMB, its leatherbacks, and the many other species and ecosystems it protects.

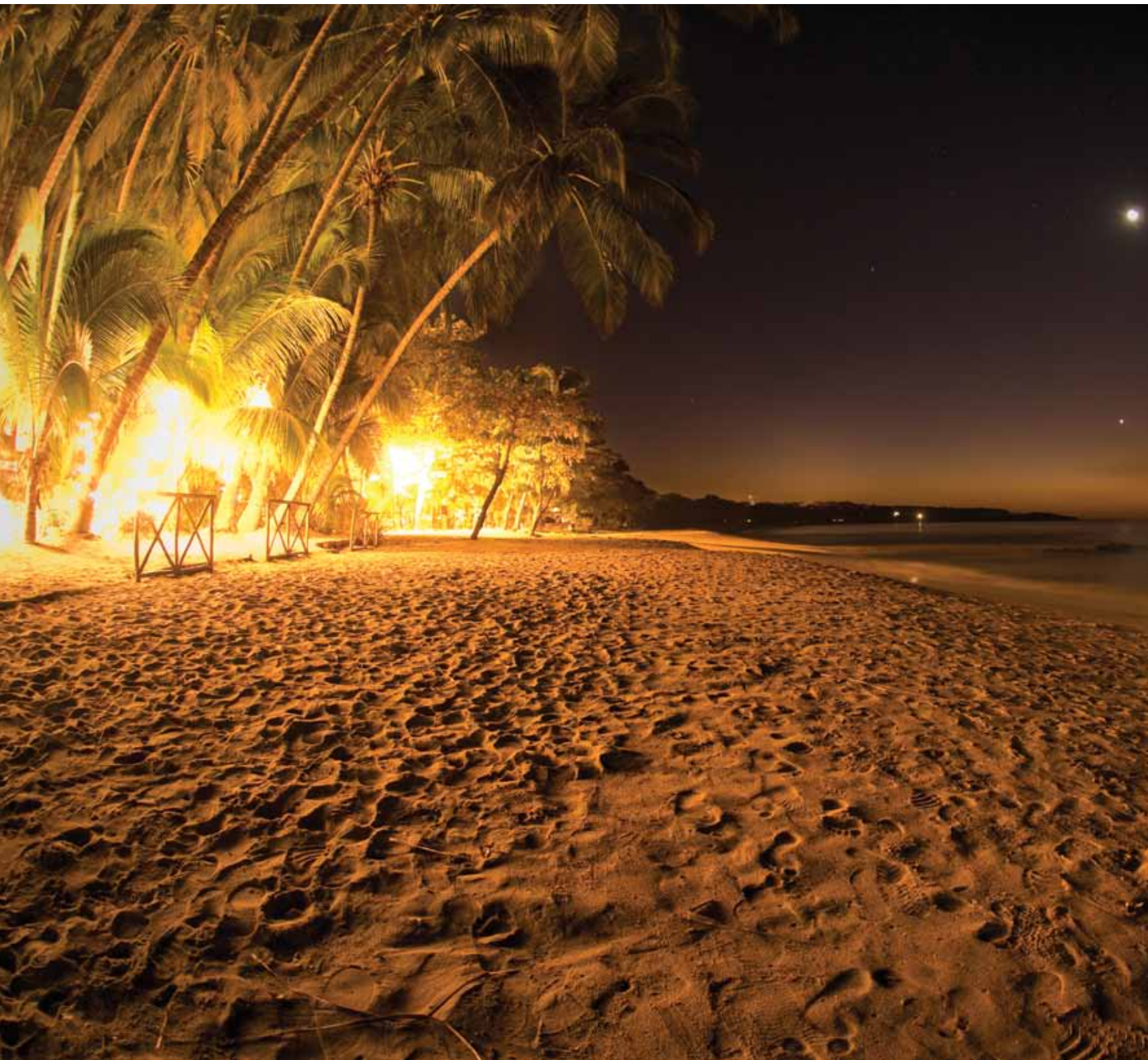
Although supporters of the park knew that the government would likely take several years to acquire all of the land within the PNMB's boundaries, they were hopeful that this acquisition would occur eventually. After all, from a scientific standpoint, PNMB's importance

for conservation is unquestionable. Leatherbacks in the eastern Pacific Ocean have declined by more than 90 percent in the past two decades, and the 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) of beach within the park host nearly half of the entire nesting population of the eastern Pacific.

In most ways, PNMB has been a tremendous success for leatherbacks. The two primary threats that led to their decline—harvesting of eggs and incidental capture in fisheries—have been eliminated within the park. All that remains is to ensure a natural ecosystem in which female leatherbacks can continue to safely nest, their eggs can incubate, and their hatchlings, undisturbed, can make their way back to the sea. Unfortunately, the struggle to guarantee these conditions is far from over, and the path ahead is unclear.

Currently, the most serious threat to the sanctity of this protected area is coastal development. In coastlines north and south of PNMB, sleepy seaside villages have been transformed into luxury resort destinations, with their associated bright lights, restaurants, clubs, and marinas. Developers now have focused their sights on PNMB, one of the few remaining undeveloped areas on Costa Rica's northwest coast. The unresolved issue of private inholdings within the park boundaries has led to constant quarrelling between those who seek to change the park boundaries to allow for development and those who oppose such actions, which would jeopardize leatherbacks and their nesting habitats.

It's possible that the best opportunity for consolidation of the park occurred during its creation, when development interests were not as strong or as complex. At that time, there were relatively few privately owned lands within the park. Since then, however, many of those lands



Just outside the boundary of Las Baulas National Marine Park, Costa Rica, lies the popular tourist destination of Tamarindo, where light from beachside developments floods the beach. Up the road, the park, which hosts half of all leatherback nesting in the eastern Pacific Ocean, faces the increasing threat of development. © JASON BRADLEY / BRADLEYPHOTOGRAPHIC.COM

have been parceled and sold to other private landowners, despite being located within the park and, ultimately, being subject to expropriation by the Costa Rican government at any time. Moreover, many years have passed since the establishment of the park, during which the government made no attempt to expropriate the private lands, leaving many landowners with the impression that the government might never do so.

Today, because of the government's decades of inactivity to consolidate the park, it's common to hear arguments about legal insecurities of landowners within the park and of developers. However, those who purchased land within the park boundaries either ignored this important fact or mistakenly believed that the private status of the

land was inviolate. Regardless, a solution to the current impasse must be found to ensure a safe future for leatherbacks.

Fortunately, those who support the park and its turtles are many: local guides, park rangers, researchers, volunteers, nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, and—importantly—residents of Playa Grande (the main beach within the park) who have recently become more engaged with efforts to enforce and manage the protected area. PNMB is a site of great pride both nationally and internationally as well as an important refuge for marine and coastal resources in Costa Rica. It is my steadfast hope that past and present conservation efforts in this extraordinary park will lead to permanent protection, peace, and survival of leatherback turtles. ■