



The Easter Turtles

A Journey Of Wonder
and Hope

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THE EASTER TURTLES - A JOURNEY OF WONDER AND HOPE

by

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In January this year (2023) something amazing happened. Something that has never happened before. In the vast deep blue ocean a turtle decided to embark on an extraordinary journey. This turtle wasn't just any turtle but a loggerhead turtle. With each graceful stroke of its flippers, through relentless currents and unfamiliar territories, this loggerhead turtle ventured southward from the tropical areas of Northern Australia to a place almost 2,000 kms away arriving at Central Coast NSW in a beach called Shelley Beach.

Perhaps this loggerhead turtle was lost. Perhaps it just decided to venture away and explore uncharted waters far removed from the northern areas of Queensland or perhaps it was led astray? No matter what the reason, this courageous turtle decided to go on a journey, a journey to find the perfect sanctuary to lay her most precious eggs. So off she went, to an unknown destination and there was no turning back.

Along her journey, this loggerhead turtle encountered a variety of marine life. Schools of iridescent fish dancing through the water. Playful Dolphins, majestic sharks and ethereal jellyfish graced her path. Towering whales breached the surface, elusive octopus, steadfast oysters and a abundance of crustaceans from the scuttling crabs, to the regal lobsters and

prawns. As she ventured deeper, this loggerhead turtle saw brightly coloured coral reefs and forests of seaweed swaying rhythmically along the ocean floor. She confronted all sorts of weather conditions braving unpredictable king tides and swift currents and thunderous rainstorms, while avoiding plastic bottles and straws discarded from humans sailing in their yachts and boats. Yet undaunted by all these obstacles, this loggerhead turtle pressed onward on her incredible journey to a place untrodden by both her and her ancestors.

Upon reaching the shores in total darkness guided only by the gentle glow of the moon and stars, this loggerhead turtle decided to explore her new surroundings. Tentatively she touched the sand with her flippers. A sense of peace came over her.

"This place may be unknown to me but the sand feels warm and soft. A perfect haven for me to lay my eggs . It will be wonderful to have a new generation of turtles," she said to herself as her thoughts whispered into the stillness.

So in the midst of night, with the beach totally silent and empty of any human activity, this loggerhead turtle began carving a large area in the sand. Methodically and carefully with every movement of her flippers her nest took shape. Soon enough her crater like nest became the perfect size for her precious eggs. The loggerhead turtle carefully deposited each egg into the sand at a time. Then, with each grain of sand, she used her flippers to cover her nest with precision and care, ensuring it remained hidden from any potential threats and human activity. Deep within the sand, more than 100 eggs nestled intertwined with the rising sun. As dawn loomed, and knowing that her future babies are well protected from the elements and predators that may be nearby, this loggerhead turtle ventured back to the beckoning waves that brought her in. She sat momentarily and waited for the perfect wave to take her back into the depths of the deep blue sea.

Upon the first rays of daylight, on that very same morning, two beach walkers went on their leisurely stroll along the shoreline. To their astonishment, they spotted that same loggerhead turtle poised at the edge of the waves ready to swim back into the deep blue sea. Sensing the significance of their discovery, one of them quickly captured snapshots of this majestic creature moments before it disappeared beneath the simmering waves. They immediately phoned the animal rescue centre WIRES who in turn triggered a cascade of alerts to other protection authorities and even the local council telling them of their unusual sighting. The local animal rescue and protection organisations such Central Coast Marine Rescue (CCMR) and National Parks and Wildlife were then contacted.

United by a shared sense of purpose, volunteers from Central Coast Marine Rescue, National Parks and Wildlife as well as other concerned organisations, knew they had to act quickly and promptly and locate this nest with the precious eggs laid by the loggerhead turtle. Noticing faint footprints left by the turtle etched in the sand, they followed them in the hope to these footprints will lead them back to the nest and hatchlings. Once the nest was located the volunteer's next priority was to shield these fragile from any unforeseen predators. So with extra support from the local community that is exactly what they did. In a remarkable display of communal effort, local residents rallied alongside the volunteers erecting wire fencing around the area to create a barrier against any unforeseen predators while others stopped beachgoers and their dogs from going near the nest site. There was also signage erected warning the public to stay off the zoned area. In the end star pickets and wire were used to create a exclusion zone 15 m x 15 m around the area. For the eggs to be developed at a healthy rate a layer of black sand was delicately sprinkled on top of the beach sand, to keep the eggs at a consistent warm temperature optimising the chances of successful hatching 8-12 weeks later.

News of this loggerhead turtle's adventure spread like wildfire with the media becoming

involved. It made media headlines on television, local radio and even social media pages. Having a loggerhead turtle nest so close to home I knew I had to catch a glimpse of this momentous event. "What an opportunity," I thought. I never heard of a loggerhead turtle and for one to be nesting just over 90 minutes away by car is surreal. In the right climate these eggs will take another 4 weeks to hatch so I hadn't much time if I am to see them. So the following weekend, in the middle of February, I decided to embark on my own adventure and take a drive from my home in South West Sydney to Shelley Beach (Central Coast NSW).

With it being a warm summer's morning, I packed a bottle of cool water, a trusty hat to shield myself from the potential hot scorching sun and I diligently applied a layer of sun screen to safeguard me from the blazing Aussie summer sun. I also grabbed some homemade biscuits and a piece of fruit to eat along the way and off I went. At 7.15am I was on the road, my car radio playing me music that I can sing to on and my trusty GPS ready for when I need directions in the hope to arrive around 9am before the beach became crowded.

As I drove along the freeway my mind became swirled with a flurry of questions and anticipations. What do these fragile eggs look like that are nestled beneath the sand? Will I arrive in time before they hatch and have disappeared out to sea? Am I able to take photos? I was confident making my way to the Central Coast as I have been there numerous times before, yet it was my first visit to Shelley Beach. Once I veered off the exit to the Central Coast I turned to my GPS knowing that it will give me the accurate directions I need. My aim was to arrive promptly and be able to find a car park before hordes of beach goers turn up and crowd the beach, particularly since a warm summers day was forecasted.

Driven by determination and curiosity I pressed on, and despite confronting heavy traffic

after an unforeseen road incident, two hours later I finally made it to Shelley Beach. I parked my car safely near the entrance to the beach and stood at the top of the stairs totally mesmerised by the vast size of the beach before me.

I climbed down the weathered wooden steps one at a time, each foot echoing a reverent anticipation. As I stepped onto the white soft sand below, I paused taking in the breathtaking panoramic view of the ocean spread far and wide in both directions, which had unfolded before my eyes. I had to look left and right to figure out which direction to walk to find the whereabouts of these turtle eggs. Then suddenly, in the distance, I spotted a large area fenced off to the public. With the summer sun beaming down, I made my way trudging my feet up and down along the soft white sand.

I passed by fellow beach goers, some walking their dogs - with some dogs off leash and other dogs who have come in after a play in the water. There were sunbathers with their towels spread out basking themselves in the warm sunshine while others had emerged from the water after an invigorating early morning swim. Then of course there was me, a lady from South West Sydney making her way to a spot where a loggerhead turtle had laid her eggs.

As I drew nearer to the sight, I spotted a section where black ebony coloured sand had covered a mound on the beach within a large area wired off to the public and of course animal predators such as dogs and foxes which may harm the eggs. There was also a warning sign advising the public to keep off the protected area. A sense of profound wonder came upon me as I stood transfixed in awe knowing underneath this mountain of sand hides baby turtles eggs waiting to be hatched and make their way into the world, the big wide world, just like their mother has done before them. I began taking photos and videos of what I had just seen.

About 15 minutes later, volunteers from the Marine Wildlife Rescue Central Coast of NSW (MWRCC) and National Parklands arrived on the scene. There were four volunteers in total. They climbed over the wire fencing making their oh the other side to where the eggs have been laid by mother turtle. Each person had a job to do. One person checked the temperature of the black sand making sure the temperature was 25 degrees Celsius or higher. "Twenty five (25) degrees Celsius is the optimal temperature for the egg's development and hatching. Even higher is better," the volunteer explained to me.

While that person was checking the temperature, another volunteer changed the battery of the thermometer, while a third person added more black sand, to provide the eggs with extra warmth and heat, particularly since the night temperatures are much cooler than during the day and the final person checked the progress of the eggs. I chatted to the volunteers engaging in conversation and gaining a newfound appreciation for these captivating creatures. Other members of the public passed by, making further conversation before departing. As the last volunteers and fellow onlookers dispersed, leaving the scene behind, a sense of fulfilment washed over me. I sat on the soft sand reflecting on my journey, grateful for the opportunity to be able to witness the marvels of nature and thanking God for the wonder that unfolded before my eyes.

Slowly I rose and made my way back to my car patiently waiting to take me on my long journey back to my home. Thoughts swirled my mind eager to share my morning at Shelley Beach to the rest of the world. As I bid farewell to the turtle's eggs and Shelley Beach for today, I hoped and prayed that these eggs will hatch in due time and a new generation of baby turtles will be ready to embark on their own journey into the vastness of the sea.

Home at last. I pull into my driveway. A surge of pride came through me as I reflect upon the feat I had just accomplished. I drove to Shelley Beach and back on my own. I couldn't

help but marvel at the power of my inner voice, the guiding instinct that propelled me forward. I had a wonderful morning, a morning of discovery venturing into the unknown, witnessing something that may be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. I met wonderful volunteers who selflessly dedicated themselves to ensure the successful hatching of the loggerhead turtle eggs hatch and the safe passage of the newborn turtles into the boundless expanse of the sea.

As more time passed, summer was coming to an end and autumn was just around the corner. Autumn meant cooler temperatures both day and night. It also meant that Easter wasn't far away either. I wondered if these turtle eggs will hatch before or after Easter as intuitively I sensed that Easter was the time this miracle will happen. I continually followed the progress of the loggerhead turtles on social media as each update was posted. On one of the MWRCC social media posts I made comment questioning whether these eggs will last till Easter in the hope that perhaps they may do. With each day passing and the time coming closer to Easter intuitively I believed the logger head turtle's eggs will hatch and the turtles will be the Easter turtles.

In early April a difficult decision was made by the volunteers up at Shelley Beach. With the encroaching arrival of the cooler weather, it became imperative these loggerhead turtle eggs had to be relocated for any chance of survival. Taronga Zoo in Sydney was fully equipped with incubators capable of maintaining the optimal conditions for the eggs to hatch. The volunteers knew relocating the eggs to Taronga Zoo was the only option for these eggs best chance to hatch. So the volunteers vigilantly collected all of these delicate fragile eggs and carefully transported them to Taronga Zoo.

Within a few days of arrival at Taronga Zoo a remarkable transformation began to unfold. One by one the loggerhead turtle eggs hatched. The timing, was significant too. The timing

aligned with Holy week, the sacred week leading up to Easter. By the end of Holy Week all the eggs hatched. There were 130 eggs in total.

The following Sunday the hatched eggs were transported back to their original location at Shelley Beach where the baby turtles swam out to sea. This particular Sunday wasn't just any Sunday. Sunday was Easter Sunday. These loggerhead turtles an Easter miracle, a great representation of what Easter is all about - New Life. Through their journey from hatching to the open sea, these loggerhead turtles personified the power of hope and unyielding spirit of renewal. Thanks to all the volunteers Shelley Beach stood witness to these hatchlings, a testament to the enduring cycle of life and the eternal wonders of nature.

Now these baby turtles are embarking on their own voyage, finding their way out in the deep blue sea, surrendering themselves to the currents that will guide their destiny. They will face many challenges on their path forward, the main one being survival. Statistically, only a small amount of hatchlings survive. However, miracles happen. Perhaps they will defy the odds just like their mother did and, grow into mature adult loggerhead turtles. It will be wonderful, if one day ,they and their courageous mother, return to the hallowed shores of Shelley Beach and lay their eggs for future generations to come and I'll be able to drive up there again and see them for years ahead.