



Sea turtle conservation



Goals:

1. **Species Preservation:** Protect and conserve endangered sea turtles by addressing threats to their survival.
2. **Population Growth:** Promote safe hatching and release practices.
3. **Habitat Restoration:** Improve and maintain clean, safe nesting.
4. **Community Engagement:** Educate and involve local communities in sustainable marine conservation efforts.
5. **Ecosystem Health:** Support the broader marine ecosystem by ensuring the continued presence of sea turtles, a keystone species.

Availability: All year round (happens every week of the year with no blackout dates)

Project Capacity: Maximum of 26 participants at one time

Project Start & End Days: Saturdays

Project Work Days: Monday to Friday (weekends are free)

Support Provided: Program Manager provides detailed introduction and culture training on arrival. Area orientation tour provided within 1-2 days of arrival. Our turtle project coordinator provides project-specific training and guides volunteers on all project activities. Our turtle hatchery team is actively involved in providing guidance and direction during the time our volunteers spend there. Beach cleaning and community teaching work are organized by our project coordinator in conjunction with local authorities (local government + schools). Every single activity is managed, guided and supported by our experienced local team. Local transportation to and from the project is also included each day.

Age Requirement: Must be 16 years or over. Children below 16 years must be accompanied by an adult.

Nearest Airport: Colombo Bandaranaike International Airport

Location of Projects: Our main turtle hatchery is located in Galbokka (45-60 min from the volunteer house); beach cleaning and community teaching work is done across various locations in Galle (all within 5-20 min of our volunteer house). We also work with a secondary hatchery from time to time which is within 25 minutes of our volunteer house.

Meals Provided: Breakfast, lunch and dinner

Background of this Program: It's important to highlight the reality of sea turtle conservation in Sri Lanka, which is still in its nascent stages as compared to some other parts of the world.

The beaches of Sri Lanka's south western coastline have been a sanctuary for sea turtle nesting activities for several centuries. Unfortunately, factors such as excessive commercial fishing and poaching of turtle eggs by humans and other predators (dogs, monitor lizards, etc.) have resulted in their numbers dwindling significantly over the past few decades, making them an endangered species in this part of the world. To safeguard against this, the Sri Lankan government has authorized a collection of turtle hatcheries (22 at last count) along the country's western and southern coastline, who's main purpose is to provide for the overall well-being of the sea turtles and increase their numbers through conservation efforts. This includes preserving the eggs from predators and poachers, providing a safe haven for hatchings to occur, caring for baby, sick and injured turtles, feeding them daily and releasing the healthy ones into the ocean when ready.

While the above activities certainly support the sea turtle ecosystem in a positive manner, there is also (unfortunately) a touristic element to their operating model, which can sometimes be detrimental to the well-being of the turtles. Many hatcheries rely significantly on financial contributions from tourists (who visit these hatcheries to see and learn about the turtles) to earn a living as they receive little to no funding from the government to maintain their operations. This reality sometimes results in

unethical practices being followed (e.g., taking selfies with turtles, not releasing them in the ocean in time, etc.) which prioritizes tourism over animal welfare. A key way to mitigate this is to have volunteers support these hatcheries through true conservation efforts that are crucial for their well-being. This also allows hatcheries to generate additional income, since they generally earn fees from volunteer placements.

More so, very little is done in terms of educating the rural communities that matter most (e.g., local fishermen and their families, coastal inhabitants, etc.), on the value of conserving these majestic creatures and keeping the environment healthy, which can have a much wider-ranging and longer-lasting impact on their sustainability.

Sea turtles are often referred to as **keystone species**, meaning they are an irreplaceable part of the marine environment and play a crucial role in maintaining its balance.

Their roles include:

- **Maintaining coral reef ecosystems:** Hawksbill turtles consume sponges, reducing competition for space and enabling coral reefs to thrive.
- **Transporting essential nutrients:** Nesting turtles deposit eggs on beaches and lower dune systems, enriching vegetation, stabilizing dunes, and preventing coastal erosion.
- **Supporting marine ecosystems:** Green turtles graze on seagrass, maintaining healthy seagrass beds essential for various marine species. Leatherback turtles help control jellyfish populations, preventing their overgrowth, while hatchlings serve as a food source for birds, fish, and mammals.

What our Volunteers do on the Program: While we understand some of the limitations of the hatchery model, we also realize the benefits they bring to the broader ecosystem. We work with what we consider to be the most ethical hatchery in the island, which is well funded by us and as such, does not need to depend on tourist income for their sustainability. Additionally, our volunteers spend only 60% of their time working in the hatchery - the balance 40% is spent in keeping our beaches clean and doing community projects at the grassroots level like educating local school children or rural women on the importance of sea turtle and the marine conservation, so they become more environmentally conscious citizens. We also do occasional night patrolling camps during the hatching season to protect eggs from all types of predators. All of these activities together make our project unique and one of-a-kind in Sri Lanka, and we believe this has a longer-lasting and more sustainable effect on the well-being of these species and the general environment.

A typical week on the program can vary from time to time based on local conditions on the ground, but in general, **the project is structured as follows:**

- For 3 days a week, participants work in our turtle hatchery. Typical tasks include feeding and cleaning the turtles, preserving turtle eggs from predators by burying them in the dedicated hatching area, taking care of older and disabled turtles, cleaning the tanks and the general hatchery area, giving sick

and injured turtles medicines as per the directions of the turtle doctor and/or hatchery staff, filling tanks with fresh sea water to mimic their natural environment, and other ad hoc tasks as and when necessary.

- 1 day a week or “Environment Day” is dedicated for beach cleaning in the Galle area to preserve the local marine ecosystem. This is done with the support of the Galle Municipal Council (i.e., local government), who dispose the garbage we clean up. Our volunteers clean up public beaches from excessive plastic and rubbish that are harmful to the local environment and marine life (including sea turtles).
- 1 day a week or “Community Day” is dedicated to building awareness about sea turtles and their value in the marine ecosystem among the local community. This can either be in the form of classroom presentations conducted at rural schools or taking local children or rural women to the turtle hatchery and educating them onsite. Special projects (e.g., educational signage campaign, building a turtle information library, etc) are also conducted from time to time to educate locals and tourists on turtle/marine conservation.
- Additionally, during nesting season (November-May) we do night patrolling camps about twice a month where groups spend the night in tents on the beach with the hope of watching mother turtles hatch their eggs and preserving them from human and animal poachers.

Special Activities (0-1 Day per Week)

- Educating local communities (e.g., children, women, and monks) about marine conservation depending on the availability.
- Developing awareness campaigns and signage
- Supporting recycling initiatives or reforestation projects.
- Doing river clean ups

Night Patrols

- Night patrols are conducted during the primary nesting season (December to April). Volunteers spend nights on nesting beaches to:
- Observe and document mother turtles laying eggs.
- Safeguard eggs for relocation to secure

Recommended Attire: On all hatchery and beach cleaning days (i.e., 4 out of 5 days), casual comfortable clothing (t-shirts, shorts, sandals, flipflops, hats, sunscreen, etc.) is recommended as participants are out in the open for significant periods of time. For Community Day (once a week), it is advisable to dress more conservatively, especially if going inside a school. It is mandatory to wear our light cotton teaching coats in the school (provided by us) during teaching sessions/presentations in the school.