

The Amazon Chelonia Project: Conserving The Amazon Turtles

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Turtles are a resource of great importance to the human communities that inhabit the Amazon, a region where the uncontrolled hunting of turtles, tortoises and other animals, is an ancient predatory action. During the Seventies, it was registered a great decline in *Podocnemis expansa* (giant amazon river turtle) populations, and, as an outcome, it was proposed the first governmental policies towards the conservation of this species. Since the creation of the Amazon Chelonia Project, in 1979, by the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), the *P. expansa* nesting sites became a target of protecting and managing activities. This Project, which is coordinated by the Brazilian National Center for Conservation and Management of Reptiles and Amphibians (RAN), nowadays a part of the Chico Mendes Institute for the Biodiversity Conservation, is executed at the northern and mid-western regions of Brazil, at 115 Chelonia spawning areas (sandy river beaches), which are located in the main rivers that compose the Amazonas River Basin. Out of the Amazon turtles, *P. expansa* is the species of the most economic importance and it is used as a species-symbol for the protection of other ones of equal ecological value, such as *P. unifilis* (yellow-spotted amazon river turtle), *P. sextuberculata* (six-turbercled river turtle), *P. erythrocephala* (red-headed river turtle), and *Peltocephalus dumerilianus* (big-headed amazon river turtle). The management methodology consists, basically, of: i) monitoring the spawning beaches and the hatching of the hatchlings, under the form of data collecting in a field card; ii) marking the clutches by using numbered wooden sticks; iii) encompassing the nesting beaches where the majority of the clutches are laid by the females; iv) controlling the hatching process; v) after the hatching process, the clutches are opened and the hatchlings are removed, counted, sorted and transferred to nurseries, where they stay for a period of approximately 15 days while they lose their characteristic smell (the one that attracts predators); vi) the hatchlings are released in their natural habitat; vii) carrying out Environmental Education activities towards river-bank communities that inhabit the Amazon, showing them the importance of conserving the Turtles from the Amazon, as well as the importance of conserving the ecosystems where they live in. As a result, more than 57 million of hatchlings had already been returned to nature, thanks to the efforts of the Amazon Chelonia Project.

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