



Sea Turtle Murals Inspire Conservation

By ANDREW J. SCHNELLER, ALYSSA IRIZARRY, and S. HOYT PECKHAM

Public murals in Mexico have long served as platforms for social commentary and transformation. In the 1920s, influential artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros began wielding the power of their paintbrushes to bring the complex ideals of the Mexican Revolution into daily life, thereby helping to form a new public consciousness. Building on this tradition, the sea turtle conservation community of the Baja California peninsula has turned to public murals to help shape pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. In towns throughout Baja California, sea turtles now glide across the once blank walls of schools, restaurants, and gas stations. In these murals, they swim through marine worlds teeming with life, delight groups of ecotourists, and even collect plastic rubbish for recycling.

A recent study conducted by Dr. Andrew J. Schneller and Alyssa Irizarry from the School for Field Studies suggests that these sea turtle murals have important and positive effects. Over the course of 333 interviews with adults and students in nine cities, researchers found a positive correlation between mural exposure, heightened pro-environmental attitudes, and increased sea turtle-friendly behavior. Many students interviewed explained that the murals helped them to forge an emotional connection with sea turtles, a connection that served as the foundation for changes made in their attitudes and actions. Adults described similar experiences: “When I see a mural, I think about the sea and the protection of marine animals,” noted one participant.

Schneller and Irizarry’s research also highlighted the important role that local nongovernmental organizations such as Grupo Tortuguero play in creating lasting change. In 2002, Grupo Tortuguero’s Proyecto Caguama was confronted with the difficult task of mitigating fisheries bycatch of loggerhead turtles. In response, Grupo

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Tortuguero developed a suite of outreach initiatives to convey a core message of responsibility and empowerment to the community: that ultimately, the fate of the Pacific loggerhead lay in the hands of Baja fishermen and their families. Informative workshops for fishermen and curriculum enrichment for schoolchildren were complemented by a range of locally resonant media, including comic books, brochures, radio programming, and—of course—sea turtle murals. In addition, regional festivals, holiday parades, sports competitions, and puppet shows were produced to celebrate sea turtles as natural treasures. This integrated approach to conservation communications has resulted in substantial decreases in sea turtle bycatch and poaching.

Schneller and Irizarry’s research demonstrates that environmentally themed public murals have the potential to profoundly and positively affect sea turtle conservation. They can help to weave new concepts, values, and attitudes into the collective consciousness of a community. The true potential of murals, however, is realized when they are incorporated into a holistic outreach campaign—one that educates, engages, and inspires in thoughtful and locally resonant ways. ■

THIS PAGE: Painted by Marcos Aragon, this mural at the entrance to Puerto Adolfo López Mateos was designed by ProCaguama and Grupo Tortuguero to celebrate the area’s local loggerhead population and the potential for sea turtle-based ecotourism.
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Visit www.SeaTurtleStatus.org to see additional murals painted throughout Baja California Sur.