

= Death of Jairo Mora Sandoval =

Jairo Mora Sandoval (March 22 , 1987 ? May 31 , 2013) was a Costa Rican environmentalist who was murdered while attempting to protect leatherback turtle nests . Just before midnight on May 30 , 2013 , Mora and four female volunteers were abducted by a group of masked men . The women eventually escaped and informed the police . Mora 's bound and beaten body was found on the beach the next morning . An autopsy determined he died by asphyxiation after suffering a blow to the head .

Sea turtles are protected by law in Costa Rica , but poaching remains common . Locals take eggs , which are believed to be an aphrodisiac , and sell them on the black market . The egg trade has been linked to drug trafficking and organized crime . Environmentalists working in Limón say they are often threatened for trying to protect turtle eggs . Jairo Mora was one such environmentalist working in the area .

In the wake of Mora 's death , the organization he worked with cancelled beach patrol efforts in Costa Rica . His death attracted international attention , including a statement from the United Nations and multiple rewards for information on the case . In Costa Rica , his death led to calls for reform of environmental policy . On June 4 , the government met with environmentalists to discuss potential changes to policy . A plan submitted by environmentalists and endorsed by Environment Minister René Castro would set up a new protected area and grant park rangers more authority to stop poachers , among other changes . On June 5 , vigils were held across Costa Rica in honor of Mora . On June 18 , the government announced the allocation of ? 20 million (US \$ 40 @ , @ 000) , which was later upped to ? 30 million (US \$ 60 @ , @ 000) , to memorialize Mora .

= = Background = =

Costa Rica has a good reputation for wildlife conservation in general , and sea turtles have been protected by national legislation in Costa Rica since 1966 . The country prides itself on its natural beauty and the nation 's economy depends heavily on ecotourism . Tens of thousands of people visit the country every year to observe its sea turtles . The turtles of Costa Rica include the leatherback turtle , a critically endangered species .

The Marine Turtle Population Law of 2002 assigns a three @-@ year prison sentence to anyone who " kills , hunts , captures , decapitates , or disturbs marine turtles " . Even so , it is common for locals to harvest eggs for personal use or for sale in local bars due to supposed aphrodisiac qualities . A poacher can make up to \$ 300 in one night , selling eggs for about \$ 1 each on the black market . Eggs obtained from poaching are often sold to drug dealers or traded for drugs . Poachers are often armed , usually with knives , but sometimes with assault rifles . In the impoverished Limón area , locals claim that police are either colluding with , or afraid of , drug traffickers and poachers . Poaching has been cited as a major reason for declining sea turtle populations around the world .

Although poaching is not new , conservationists report that it is on the rise in Costa Rica . In the period leading up to Mora 's death , poaching became an attractive side income for with drug traffickers . In 2012 , a group of six men used assault rifles and hand guns to break into a protected nursery run by the nonprofit environmentalist group Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) . The men tied up and gagged the volunteers , then smashed or stole a total 1520 sea turtle eggs . After the incident , police began accompanying environmentalists on their nightly beach walks . It was later revealed that the incident was intended as a warning for environmentalists to stay off the beaches , according to WIDECAST 's Latin American director Didiher Chacón . According to Limón police chief Erick Calderón , 21 people were arrested in 2012 on charges related to turtle poaching .

= = Life and career of Jairo Mora = =

Jairo Mora was a research assistant who worked for Paradero Eco @-@ Tour , a state @-@

sponsored animal rescue group run by Vanessa Lizano . He was born in Limón on March 22 , 1987 , to a Nicaraguan father and a Costa Rican mother . From an early age , he was involved in volunteer work .

Mora regularly volunteered with WIDECAST , which coordinates efforts to protect turtle eggs across Central America . Mora and other WIDECAST volunteers walked Costa Rican beaches nightly to ward off egg thieves . In 2011 , the group protected about 3 % of all turtle nests in Costa Rica ; in 2012 , it increased to 30 % . Conservation efforts on Moín Beach , which Mora headed , collected 1 @, @ 500 leatherback turtle nests , the most from any beach in Costa Rica .

According to Lizano , her organization often receives threats from poachers because of its conservation efforts . In 2012 , Mora was personally threatened at gunpoint " to back off and stop the walks " . He and Lizano were also subject to intimidation efforts throughout the 2012 nesting season . " Both Jairo and I were being followed by motorbikes with guys carrying AK @-@ 47s , " Lizano recalled . After a threat against her family , Lizano relocated from Limón to San José .

At the start of the 2013 leatherback turtle nesting season in April , police decreased their involvement with conservation efforts . Guards were on duty four days a week , but no longer personally escorted volunteers . On April 23 , 2013 , Mora asked supporters on Facebook to petition the police for more help . " Send messages to the police so they come to Moín Beach " , he wrote . " Tell them not to be afraid but to come armed ... we need help and fast . " On April 28 , Mora told La Nación that environmentalists were being threatened " by a mafia that was looting the nests for eggs " . According to friends , Mora received frequent death threats , including an incident just weeks before his death where he was threatened at gunpoint .

On May 5 , La Nación accompanied Mora and Lizano on a typical night 's work . Mora spoke about feeling alone and unprotected in his struggle to save the turtles . Denying reports that police had stepped up their efforts he said : " If a guard or policeman says he supports us , he is lying . " La Nación confirmed that no police were assigned to patrol the beach that evening . When asked if he was afraid , Mora said " Yes , it 's scary , the worst could happen at any time . " After a May 6 incident where poachers stole a large number of nests , Limón police and the Coast Guard began patrolling Moín Beach more thoroughly .

= = Death = =

On the evening of May 30 , 2013 , Mora and four female volunteers ? three from the United States and one from Spain ? were patrolling Moín Beach in Limón province , Costa Rica . At approximately 11 : 30 pm Mora stepped out of his jeep to move a tree trunk and was ambushed by at least five masked men carrying guns . The men drove the car with the four women to a nearby abandoned house and took their phones , money , and other belongings . Three of the men drove off with Mora . The women were tied up and left in an abandoned house ; they eventually freed themselves and went to the police .

Five police officers were on duty the night of Mora 's murder , and they had been in radio contact with him about an hour before his death . However , according to Calderón , the police were present to increase " the number of eyes and ears on the beach " , not to protect the conservationists . He also noted that the beach is too large to constantly monitor all of it in the dark .

Mora 's naked body was found on the beach the next morning . His body was found beaten and with his hands tied behind his back . Autopsy results revealed that he had died from asphyxiation after being struck in the back of the head , likely with an object found at the site of his murder . Earlier reports incorrectly stated he had been shot . Mora was 26 at the time of his death .

= = Reaction = =

Judicial Investigation Police were unable to immediately determine a motive for Mora 's death . Lizano suspects poachers were involved , saying Mora was targeted for protecting the turtle nests . Chacón said drug traffickers , who often are also poachers , were likely behind the killing . Given Mora 's recent calls for police help , " it seems like it was an act of revenge " , he said .

Chacón said he was " very hurt " by Mora 's death . " It 's not possible that citizens who protect nature have to suffer from this type of attacks " , he said . President Laura Chinchilla called on police and the judicial system to solve what she described as the " despicable murder " of Mora . A statement from the United States Embassy in Costa Rica remembered Mora as " a committed Costa Rican environmentalist " and called his death " senseless " . The United Nations released a statement sending condolences and recognizing Mora 's " noble work " to protect " an essential part of Costa Rica 's and the world 's biodiversity . "

Todd Steiner , executive director of the Turtle Island Restoration Network raised money for a \$ 10 @, @ 000 reward for information leading to the arrest of those responsible . " Jairo ? s murderers must be brought to justice so that [people] know that this will never be tolerated , " said Steiner in a statement . " The whole world is watching to make sure the Costa Rican government brings these thugs to justice and makes sea turtle nesting beaches safe for conservationists to do their work . " A petition started by the Sea Turtle Restoration Project calling for swift justice generated more than 10 @, @ 000 signatures within two weeks .

Mora death raised fears that the country 's economy would be hurt by reduced tourism , leading Univision to describe the situation as " an internal crisis " . Commentary published by the Costa Rican Times alleged that the true culprits would never be found , saying whoever was blamed would be a scapegoat offered up by the drug traffickers . The government " is happy letting the Caribbean side of Costa Rica lose all tourism " continued the commentary by Dan Stevens . " Maybe the group Sea Turtle Conservation with Guns should be formed to fight back . " An editorial published by the Tico Times asked why it took a murder to get the government to act . " Mora reached out for help before he was killed , and no one came to the rescue , no matter what political spin is put on it " , said the author . Mora 's death , suggested the author , shows that " the drug traffickers are winning " , that crime is out of control in Limón , and that " the bad guys operate with near impunity . " The editorial concluded by imploring Costa Ricans to re @-@ evaluate their personal environmental habits and support environmental groups that keep fighting . The Guápiles Biofestival , an arts festival held each year during early June , was also dedicated to Mora .

On June 3 , Vice President Alfio Piva described Mora 's death as an " accident " due to Limón ? s high crime rate on live TV . He quickly retracted the statement , saying his words had been misunderstood . " I only meant to recognize that the area where this happened unfortunately has a high murder rate and that there is high risk when working in an area where there is drug trafficking " , he explained . Unsatisfied by the explanation , environmental groups called for a public apology . On June 4 , members of the Legislative Assembly said that Piva 's comments had " dishonored the entire country " . Led by José María Villalta and Juan Carlos Mendoza , opposition party members called for Piva 's resignation . " We are really full of anger and annoyance . We are embarrassed as a nation " , said Mendoza .

On June 5 , vigils in honor of Mora were held in at least six Costa Rica cities to coincide with World Environment Day . Ecologist Federation president Mauricio Álvarez , who helped organize the vigils , said " We are asking for justice for Jairo ? s murder and ... demand a halt to the impunity that has reigned over too many threats to ecologists , farmers and indigenous groups . " Despite rainy weather , hundred of people showed up to carry signs , light candles , and place stuffed turtles on the beach . Leaflets blamed police and the government for Mora 's death and demanded swift justice . Among those in attendance were Roberto Molina , secretary general of the Environmental Ministry 's labor union , and José Lino Chavez , Vice Minister of Waters and Oceans .

On June 6 , Sea Shepherd Conservation Society founder Paul Watson offered an additional \$ 30 @, @ 000 reward for information leading to the capture of Mora 's murderer . He said the money would come from his personal wealth , not from Sea Shepherd , and that he had sold a vehicle to fund the reward . Watson 's pledge , together with additional funds raised by Steiner , brought the total reward to \$ 56 @, @ 000 . A separate memorial fund to assist Mora 's family and continue conservation efforts in his name raised \$ 7 @, @ 000 . In early July , Costa Rican businessman Roy Rivera said he was working to raise funds to increase the information reward .

Watson , who is wanted by Costa Rica for skipping bail on charges related to a 2002 incident , said Mora 's death proves that his own life would be in " great danger " if he ever returned to Costa Rica .

" The authorities were very quick to respond to Japan and issued an arrest warrant for the protection of sharks ... however , when it comes to a horrible murder of a compassionate conservationist , the government does nothing . " Later in June , Watson announced that his organization 's next boat would be named the S.S. Jairo Mora Sandoval . " We do not want the name of this courageous and passionate young man to be forgotten " , he said on Facebook .

On June 12 , the Ocean Futures Society joined the chorus of international voices calling for swift justice . " This crime , in the Limón province , has shaken the consciousnesses of many internationally , " wrote Ruben Arvizú , the society 's Latin American director . Arvizú said that Costa Rica should make the case a national priority . On June 18 , Costa Rican rapper Yaco released a song entitled " Playa Roja " (Red Beach) about Mora . Yaco , who is known for using his songs as social commentary , released the song via social media , saying it was " not a commercial release " .

At the June 26 - 28 Inter American Convention on the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC) , Mora 's death was a popular subject . A declaration from the Mexican delegation read , " As sea turtles are a shared resource , criminal activity that prevents [on @-@ site] protection efforts from taking place in one country presents an urgent concern to all range states . " A convention floor speech and a second written declaration also discussed Mora 's death .

= = Aftermath = =

Following Mora 's death , WIDECAST suspended beach patrol operations . " We can 't risk human lives for this project , " Chacón said . " But this is probably the exact result that the killers were hoping for . " Many volunteers quit the project after Mora 's death , leaving the organization 200 people short staffed . Organizations such as WIDECAST depend heavily on foreign volunteers . According to Chacón , the future of his organization will be in jeopardy if the situation continues . Aimee Leslie , who oversees sea turtle efforts for the World Wildlife Foundation called the situation " a critical point for conservation " in Costa Rica and " a national security issue . She said that conservation efforts were already difficult without being scared for one 's life . Lizano said she was in negotiations with the police for armed escorts on future patrols , but vowed to continue to work even if they refused . " If we forget about this beach , then Jairo died for nothing , " she said .

On June 3 , Calderón remarked that police would continue to support environmentalists and increase their presence on Moín Beach . The next day police arrested two armed men who were allegedly trying to steal turtle eggs from the same beach where Mora was killed . Also on June 4 , a group of three men and a minor was arrested on similar charges . Subsequently , Limón began to dispatch twenty police officers nightly to escort conservationists and patrol the beaches . In spite of increased police presence Lizano remarked , on June 11 , " Every night all of the [turtle] nests are raided . It is still pretty much the same even though we walk with police . "

Prompted by the death of Mora , dozens of environmentalists met with the Ministry of Environment , Energy and Telecommunications (MINAE) , headed by René Castro , to discuss their dissatisfaction with current conservation efforts on June 4 . Their requests included punishing those responsible for Mora 's death , greater criminal penalties for poaching , and more efforts by MINAE to fight egg poachers . Castro suggested implementing a plan submitted by WIDECAST . The plan would give park rangers jurisdiction to arrest poachers on Moín Beach and create a code of conduct for beach visitors nationwide . It would also increase penalties for poaching , name a new protected area after Mora , and set up a memorial fund in his name . The proposal was initially met with enthusiasm , but it later gave way to complaints about lax environmental enforcement nationwide . " This isn 't only happening in Moín and this not only happening with turtle conservation , " remarked Molina . Deputy Minister of Security Celso Gamboa , who was also in attendance , promised to increase security forces in Limón .

On June 6 , the Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a motion to form a special committee investigating Mora 's death . " It is important to acknowledge that the death of Jairo is not only the fault of these bands of criminals , but also the fault of the state , " remarked the motion 's sponsor José María Villalta . On June 19 , Castro , Chávez , the heads of several environmental groups , and

members of Mora 's family , met to work out the details of the earlier proposals . After the meeting , Castro announced that ? 20 million (approximately US \$ 40 @,@ 000) would be allocated for a monument in Mora 's honor in the form of either a new turtle observation area or an online tribute with video of nesting sea turtles . Castro also confirmed that the government had plans to turn Moín Beach into a protected park . However , the plan to name the park after Mora was abandoned at the request of his family . MINAE also plans to allocate " specialized units " armed with equipment to protect Costa Rica 's coasts from environmental threats .

Tourism to Costa Rica was down sharply during the first half of June 2013 . Jorge Molina , president of The Southern Caribbean Tourism Chamber , said Mora 's death was affecting reservations and would likely continue to do so for several months . Aurora Gámez , who owns an Manzanillo Beach hotel , said her occupancy rate normally runs at 50 % in June , but was at just 10 % in the weeks after Mora 's death . She said she had received cancellations that specifically cited Mora 's death as a factor . Cahuita hotel owner Eddie Ryan echoed Gámez , saying he had two patrons cite Mora 's death when cancelling . Restaurants , bars , tour guides , and transportation companies were also affected . Some entrepreneurs blamed WIDECAST for the lost business saying the organization was aware of the risks but continued to patrol anyway .

On June 25 , a nationwide protest was held to draw attention to a wide variety of issues . Environmental groups joined the protests , again calling for justice to be served to Mora 's murderers .

On July 2 , MINAE again met with more than 30 environmental groups to discuss the situation . Castro said that plans to make Moín Beach a protected area were moving forward . However , he said , making the area a national park was not feasible because of the number of people living on the beach . " A national park is too closed off for this particular beach " , he explained . Environmentalists requested that the Gandoca @-@ Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge , one of Mora 's favorite places , be renamed in honor of him . The plan was endorsed by his family . They also requested the formation of a " truth commission " to investigate Mora 's murder and eight other deaths from the past 20 years . Government officials said they were in the process of installing radar systems across Costa Rica to detect drug trafficking and illegal fishing , and that they would launch a plan to patrol Moín beach with the assistance of the Costa Rican Petroleum Refinery (RECOPE) . MINAE said that ? 30 million (US \$ 60 @,@ 000) had been allocated for Mora 's memorial and environmental education done in his name .

As of July 4 , no arrests had been made in relation to the murder of Mora . Ministries of Public Safety Vice Minister Celso Gamboa called the investigation ongoing . In mid @-@ June , Castro had said the investigation was proceeding well and he had " every reason to be optimistic that we will solve this crime . " On July 10 , the prosecutor 's office said two suspects had been identified and that the case would " advance significantly " over the coming week .

On July 31 , Costa Rican police raided several locations near Moín and the city of Limón , and arrested several suspects believed to be involved in Mora 's murder , as well as other crimes , including robbery and turtle egg poaching . Police said that more arrests are expected .

The first trial of the alleged perpetrators ended in a mistrial and a second trial was held in 2015 . In January 2016 , a court found seven men accused of Mora 's murder not guilty based on reasonable doubt . Four of the men were , however , sentenced to lengthy prison terms assault , kidnapping and aggravated robbery for a crime that occurred on the same beach shortly before Mora 's murder . (Donald Salmón : 27 years in prison for aggravated robbery , rape and kidnapping ; Héctor Cash : 23 years for aggravated robbery , kidnapping and sexual abuse ; José Bryan Delgado : 17 years for aggravated robbery and kidnapping ; Ernesto Centeno : 17 years for aggravated robbery and kidnapping .) Subsequently , the not guilty verdict was overturned on appeal and the four men were convicted of Moar 's murder .