

In the next decades, South Asia will continue to confront traditional economic development challenges related to pollution and resource depletion, as well as new challenges from climate change and deteriorating ecosystem services. Thus, policy makers in South Asia will require a better suite of policy instruments and more efficient implementation strategies. EDE can address these challenges by identifying real problems, expanding its tool kit and partnering with other disciplines.

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## It took thousands of turtles

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At the end of my undergraduate studies in economics I was ready to go into graduate studies in finance, monetary policy or macroeconomics. At that time in my country, the choices were not much broader than that. In order to complete my studies I needed 30 days of community work, so I went to Ostional National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR), one of a few places in the world where sea turtles come to nest in massive numbers. My task was to craft a set of rules and incentives for the local community to organize better around the unique resources of this protected area.

Over a five-day period, about 20,000 turtles come to lay their eggs in an endless procession of these fantastic animals. The actual beach is no longer than 1 km long, so turtles arriving in the second half of the 'arribada' simply dig out the eggs of the previous turtles. Hence, the community

undertook to organize the extraction and selling of eggs from the first arrival in local markets, and committed itself to keeping the beach free of predators (humans and animals) thanks to 24-hour patrolling, and clean from debris. Newborn turtles were greeted by villagers and accompanied to the water by women and children. The organized community had the support of the University of Costa Rica, which was to be my host during the 30 days in Ostional.

A new management plan was needed because increases in revenue from selling eggs and in the number of community members within the common pool resource were threatening the social agreement that was the basis of the organized community. On the bus to ONWR I met the rest of the team in charge of crafting the new plan, a strange mix of students of biology and law. Not surprisingly the point of departure was either prohibitions and sanctions, or a return to absolute conservation. I spent the next 30 days convincing them of the importance of social norms, of gradual fines and incentives, and the need to understand the household production function before expelling anybody from the organization. I cannot say I succeeded, but I surely convinced myself of the power of a good understanding of human decisions in a context of scarcity and fragile ecosystems.

After 15 days in ONWR I saw my first *arribada*, and in those four days I saw my life as a financial analyst fall to pieces. I returned to the capital and spent a lot of time looking for technical support for what until that date had been pure empiricism alone. I encountered the work of scholars like Ostrom, Barbier and Pearce in moldy, photocopied pages. I could not understand why such an illuminating body of knowledge played absolutely no role in decisions taken at ONWR. There was a complete disconnect between the international knowledge and everyday decision making involving the environmental resource base in developing countries. I wanted to break that disconnect, and to start with I needed to become an environmental economist myself.

That was 20 years ago, more or less coinciding with the launch of *Environment and Development Economics*. During these 20 years the international body of knowledge focusing on developing countries has changed dramatically, and so has local capacity.

And yet, every day governmental offices and NGOs make decisions without resorting to the accumulated 'wisdom'. Prohibitions and laws continue to be the baseline for natural resource management today. Clearly the lack of capacity of developing countries in the field of environment and development economics far exceeded my initial estimations. This is further complicated by the fact that our accumulated knowledge in the field is often not suitable for policy making: it is too partial, or too focused, or too 'esoteric' to be of direct relevance, and frequently there is no intermediary between scholars in universities and policy makers in the government.

Changing this will require committed researchers based in developing countries. When this is not possible, international scholars should avoid the tempting 'parachute in – air extraction out' strategy of doing field-work, and should instead spend time understanding local conditions and explaining the implications of their research results to local policy makers. Granted, success stories will still be few and far between, but they will

make our careers so much more cheerful and colorful that the effort will surely be worth it. I dare you to try!

Happy 20th Anniversary, *EDE*!



*A young Olive Ridley turtle making its way to the ocean*

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## **Question 7: What do you consider to be some important research questions in environment and development economics that haven't received adequate attention?**

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### **The climate change, migration and conflict nexus**

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Early this year, Thomas [Friedman \(2014\)](#) reported on a (Wikileaks) cable sent in 2008 from the US Embassy in Damascus concerning the drought