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NEWS

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## Conservationists Target Turtle Oil Beauty Aid

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Tico Times Staff

**THINK** you've discovered the fountain of youth with that new beauty product? Proceed with caution, conservationists warn, because the "miracle" ingredient may be a by-product of an endangered species.

Turtle oil, a sought-after cosmetic product that reputedly helps eradicate those fine lines around the eyes and mouth, is on the hot seat as health officials investigate conservation groups' allegations that turtle oil products are being sold here in violation of national and international wildlife protection legislation.

The Health Ministry launched a formal investigation last month after receiving a complaint from the National Sea Turtle Conservation Network — an umbrella organization for about 10 Costa Rican wildlife advocacy groups — about these allegedly illicit activities.

LILIAN Argüello, head of the Health Ministry's registry and control department, confirmed that a nationwide investigation is under way, but declined to elaborate until officials compile the results. The process could take until the end of January, she said.

"It is not a complicated process, but we are certainly conducting a serious study of the issue. The Health Ministry must investigate this thoroughly," Argüello told The Tico Times this week.

According to Isabel Naranjo, a biologist with the Sea Turtle Restoration Project (PRETOMA) — a member organization of the National Conservation Network — a year-long study revealed that at least 54 establishments sell illegal turtle products throughout the country.

**ASIDE** from turtle oil, oil-based moisture creams and facial masks, other popular products are jewelry and trinkets made from



Tico Times/Alex Berberich

**POPULAR product: turtle-oil cosmetics fill local shelves, despite wildlife laws.**

the distinctive hawksbill shell — as evidenced by a quick browse in tourist-driven shopping areas such as the Plaza de Democracia's open craft market in San José.

As part of the first phase of the crackdown — funded in part by the private U.S. Fish and Wildlife Foundation — conservationists collaborated with officials from the Costa Rican Environment Ministry and the Coast Guard to confiscate more than 2,700 hawksbill (*carey*) jewelry items from artisans in San José and the central Pacific port town of Puntarenas in December (TT, Jan. 4).

More confiscations of illegal jewelry are expected in the coming weeks and months, but organizers would not be specific to avoid

compromising the operations.

NARANJO said the project has involved extensive interviews with vendors of turtle products — both to learn how big the market is and to determine whether violations of the country's wildlife protection law are deliberate or out of ignorance. The interviews indicated that 73 percent of those who sell hawksbill crafts know the activity is illegal here.

As for those who manufacture and sell turtle cosmetics, the numbers are not yet clear, Naranjo said.

An informal poll of some cosmetic stores and spas by The Tico Times revealed that those selling or using the products do not believe what they are doing is illegal. Most readily extolled the virtues of turtle oil cream for its skin benefits.

**THE** Tico Times this week also contacted the owner of one Costa Rican company that produces turtle oil cream for a mainly national market. The owner, who asked that neither he nor his company be identified because he is concerned about a public-relations backlash, adamantly defended the integrity of his operations.

He said the business is legal because the turtles bred at the company's farm are actually freshwater turtles and are not endangered. In addition, he said the company is authorized by the Health Ministry to manufacture the product.

While conservation groups are calling on the government to evaluate all existing licenses and "notify companies of their illegal status," it was not clear by press time if the use of non-endangered freshwater turtles would be investigated by authorities.

**THIS** businessman swore by the effectiveness of turtle oil cream, which he claims is "closest to the naturally-occurring oils on human skin around the eyes." He

also said the turtles are slaughtered "in a civilized way," and the meat is sold.

Each turtle, according to this company owner, yields about two to three pounds of oil. The oil is processed and blended with other ingredients such as lanolin. Turtle oil sells for roughly \$2 for four ounces in pharmacies and supermarkets.

Synthetic turtle oil is also common in Costa Rican cosmetics. However, conservation groups argue in their complaint to the Health Ministry that many products do not indicate that the oil is synthetic, and therefore are deceiving consumers who believe they are buying the real thing. The conservationists say any product that mentions "turtle oil" should be banned because it is either illegal under wildlife protection legislation, or is violating the consumer's right to know what the product contains.

**THE** conservation groups' study determined that three Costa Rican cosmetic companies that manufacture turtle-oil cream have approvals from the Health Ministry, while a thriving market of "home-made" creams continues to grow without any such permits — in San José's Central Market, in "natural products" stores and in markets in the country's port cities, for example.

As its next step, the National Network for the Conservation of Sea Turtles is pushing for a national certification program that would offer participating businesses an emblem distinguishing them for not causing harm to sea turtles.

While Naranjo acknowledged that reaction by small business owners has been lukewarm at best, she said she hopes to bring on board agencies such as the Costa Rican Tourism Institute to promote the initiative as one that will "be highly beneficial to commerce."