

THE TORTOISE

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HOMERO'S ODYSSEY

The poet-activist Homero Aridjis

is on a quest to save Mexico's wildlife—

his 40-year journey began with sea turtles

By Zoë Lescaze

Homero Aridjis lost count of the death threats a long time ago. After more than 40 years of fighting for environmental causes in Mexico, the acclaimed writer and activist has grown used to violent intimidation, bribe attempts, and government officials telling him to quit.

Despite the systemic political corruption, corporate greed, and compromised law enforcement that often make conservation a thankless—and dangerous—business in Mexico, Aridjis has remained a tireless advocate for the natural world. Through investigative journalism, public petitions, and grassroots campaigns, Aridjis has won historic protections for animals large and small, from the majestic Gray Whales that raise calves off the Pacific coast to the dazzling swarms of Monarch Butterflies that migrate through the country's mountain forests. Some of his most innovative work, however, has been on behalf of sea turtles. When the president of Mexico declared a total ban on the trade of their eggs, meat, shells, and skin in 1990, it was because of Aridjis.

"They are incredible creatures, living pieces of prehistory," Aridjis said on a recent afternoon at his home in Mexico City, a tranquil haven cluttered with paintings, books, and indigenous Oaxacan masks that he shares with his wife and frequent collaborator Betty Ferber. At 80, Aridjis is infectious energetic: words pour forth in cascades of passion for the animals he reveres and contempt for the humans who threaten them. Short with silver hair and a broad, open face, Aridjis described watching gravid turtles emerging from the moonlit surf to lay their eggs years ago with undiminished awe: "It's like an apparition, like some mysterious creation coming from space."

Six of the world's seven species of sea turtles nest on Mexican beaches along the Gulf, Caribbean, and Pacific shorelines. As in many other Latin American countries, their eggs are widely consumed in Mexico as a purported aphrodisiac and their meat is considered a delicacy. Consequently, all of these species—Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), and Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) Sea Turtles—are listed as Vulnerable, Endangered, or Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Ironically, Aridjis's love of Mexico's turtles began in Europe, while he was serving as his country's ambassador to Holland and Switzerland in

1978. "It was an accident," he said, with a laugh, of a chance discovery that led to a lifelong passion. Back then, in the early years of his career, Aridjis enjoyed the support of the Mexican government—the same authoritarian system that would later become an adversary. As a young writer, Aridjis received federal stipends to support his work and, like other prominent intellectuals, he was awarded diplomatic posts abroad.

During his tenure in the Netherlands, Aridjis began to receive letters addressed to Mexico's then-president José López Portillo from Dutch citizens and environmental groups regarding turtle slaughter in his homeland. Aridjis passed them on, but López Portillo was indifferent, to say the least. "I sent these letters to his office and he became very angry," recalled Aridjis. The president was annoyed, he said, that his young ambassador was not "busy selling oil, gas, or uranium" to European interests.

When Aridjis returned to Mexico in 1980 after 14 years abroad, he found the country—and certain peers who once shared his values—transformed. "I had many friends who had been very idealistic. Once they started working for the government, they became extremely corrupt," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998. "I understood the system corrupts people. It's the way our government works. There's no accountability, no prosecution."

Looking around Mexico City, Aridjis saw environmental injustice everywhere—the very air had become evidence of an official disregard for living creatures, human beings included. A four-decade industrial boom had made the overpopulated capital home to oil refineries, factories, power plants, and millions of vehicles running on toxin-rich fuel, and pollution had reached record levels in the absence of any emissions standards. Birds were dropping dead from the sky, said Aridjis. Trees were withering and residents were suffering from severe respiratory problems. American diplomats serving in Mexico City were allowed to retire two years earlier for every year

Previous spread: Homero Aridjis at home in Mexico City in front of a painting of him, his wife and daughters, and their Oaxacan masks by the artist Red Grooms, a friend of the family.

Opposite: Aridjis kneels to stroke an Olive Ridley Sea Turtle digging a hole to lay her eggs on Escobilla Beach in Oaxaca, where Aridjis discovered poachers were butchering nesting females.



they served there, in compensation for the health hazards. Still, Mexican authorities would not even acknowledge the problem—likely because the national oil company Pemex and other government-owned industries were among the worst polluters. “We were living in a political environment of abuse, with no respect for the laws,” said Aridjis. And so he took action.

Rallying prominent Mexican artists and intellectuals—including his friends Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and Juan Rulfo—Aridjis founded the Grupo de los Cien (Group of One Hundred) in 1985 to protest the pollution. Their campaign successfully pressured the government to curtail car transportation, reduce the legal amount of lead in gasoline, and publish daily reports on air quality.

Around that time, Aridjis became aware of logging operations near his hometown of Contepec, in the southern-central state of Michoacán. It was there that his love of nature had crystallized following a near-fatal childhood accident. One afternoon, when he was 10 years old, Aridjis discovered a shotgun his older brother had borrowed from a friend to hunt ducks. Aridjis took it into

Aridjis began his environmental activism in 1985 in response to unchecked air pollution in Mexico City. With a group of other artists and intellectuals, Aridjis successfully forced the government to enact new clean-air regulations.

the backyard, climbed a pile of bricks, and took aim at a flock of birds overhead. They reminded him of the songbirds his mother kept caged, however, and he dropped the gun. A volley erupted from the barrel when the butt hit the bricks and caught him in the belly and hand. After an eight-hour drive to the nearest doctor and an operation no one thought would save his life, Aridjis woke up in the hospital and spent a long convalescence reading adventure stories set in far-off exotic lands.

“Contepec is a long way from any ocean or jungle and nearly ten thousand feet above sea level,” he wrote in *News of the Earth*, an essential collection of his speeches, lectures, and articles published in 2017. “I had never seen whales or dolphins, or tigers or lions, or scarlet macaws and sea turtles, but these animals soon filled my imagination and became part of my childhood mythology. . . . I had no idea that wild animals were being killed for their skins, flesh, organs, and eggs, or for the mere sport of taking their lives, but I had already learned the lesson that on this Earth . . . there is no greater luxury than life itself, for humans and animals and for plants and for the birds that I had thought of killing on the day when I almost killed myself.”

Every winter, millions of Monarch Butterflies from southeastern Canada and the northern United States migrate 2,000 miles to the hills surrounding Contepec, festooning the forests with



LEFT AND OPPOSITE: IMAGES COURTESY HOMERO ARIDJIS AND BETTY FERBER

“Like the narco- traffickers, [poachers] say ‘plata o plomo’: silver or lead.”

orange, black, and gold. When Aridjis returned for the annual gathering of “winged tigers” (as he has called the Monarchs in his poetry) in 1985, he realized the extent to which unchecked commercial logging operations were stripping the region of its trees.

“I began to be involved because it was my village, my hill, my experience of childhood,” he said. “There was terrible killing and destruction of the forest.” Aridjis said he saw photographs of trucks “crushing the butterflies in the road” and men “cutting down the trees with the butterflies on the trunks.” A series of articles by Aridjis and pressure from the Grupo de los Cien led to then-president Miguel de la Madrid declaring an official Monarch Butterfly reserve that now measures more than 200 square miles.

Galvanized by that victory, Aridjis focused his attention on Mexico’s sea turtles, gathering information firsthand and from sources throughout the country on the crisis. Although sea turtles and their eggs were protected on paper, his investigation revealed that they were being captured and killed in large numbers, and often with an astounding level of brutality.

In a series of articles for the newspaper *La Jornada*, Aridjis revealed that fishermen would regularly sever the front and rear flippers of turtles before tossing the mutilated animals back into the

Top: Aridjis looking for Bolson Tortoises (*Gopherus flavomarginatus*) in the Mapimí Biosphere Reserve in northern Mexico, where the Turtle Conservancy now protects thousands of acres.

Middle: Betty Ferber, Aridjis’s wife and collaborator, with their daughters Chloe and Eva on Escobilla Beach in 1991.

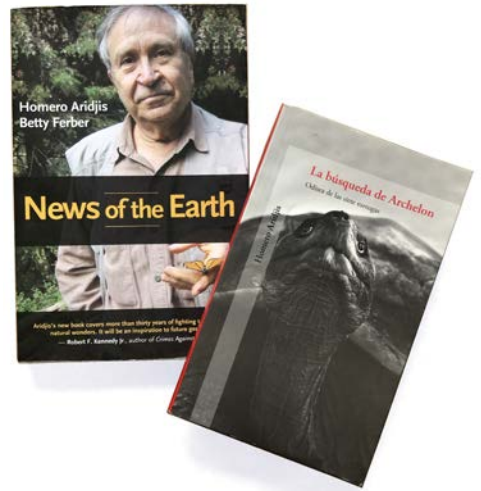
Bottom: Joel Reynolds, western director of the Natural Resources Defense Council; environmentalist (and former *Tortoise* cover subject) Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Aridjis, and Jean-Michel Cousteau, founder of the Ocean Futures Society, celebrating the cancellation of a saltworks project that would have destroyed essential calving waters for Gray Whales.



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To combat poaching, it is essential to eliminate the demand for wildlife products. An ad campaign aimed at men who consume sea turtle eggs as aphrodisiacs reads, “My man doesn’t need turtle eggs because he knows that they don’t make him more potent.”

Aridjis has published nearly 50 books of prose and verse, including *News of the Earth* (2017), a recent collection of his environmental journalism and lectures, and a children’s book, *The Search for Archelon: Odyssey of the Seven Turtles* (2006).

water. In the coastal town of Mazunte in Oaxaca, he discovered Olive Ridley Sea Turtles “piled up like boulders” that had been shot with bullets, butchered with machetes, or clubbed to death. Elsewhere, he found the bodies of females that had been cut open, their eggs removed, and left to die slowly on the sand. Poachers operated freely—often assisted by the same marines charged with guarding the nests—and turtle eggs were on the menu of every restaurant. An estimated 10 million eggs were collected and distributed throughout the country every year.

Aridjis’s graphic, exhaustively researched reports spurred international groups to take action. Earth Island Institute activists dressed in turtle costumes staged protests in front of the Mexican consulate in San Francisco, and Greenpeace members in London organized demonstrations during a visit from President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Using this momentum, Aridjis led the Grupo de los Cien in publishing a declaration addressed to the president decrying the wholesale slaughter of sea turtles that was endorsed by dozens of other conservation groups, universities, scientists, and intellectuals. More than 70,000 letters flooded the president’s office and a month later, on May 28, 1990, Salinas de Gortari signed a total and

permanent ban on the capture of sea turtles and trade in their products.

But Aridjis knew that the turtles needed to be protected along their entire migratory routes, from Chile to Mexico, for conservation in any one country to be effective. The Grupo de los Cien fought for a pan-Latin American agreement for a decade before the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles finally came into force in May 2001.

Because lack of enforcement remains a problem, Aridjis has continued to devise inventive approaches to turtle conservation. Perhaps this is because he is a poet, a weaver of dreams whose lyric imagination has allowed him to tackle poaching with the creativity of an artist. In 2002, Aridjis petitioned the pope to declare turtles red meat (rendering them off-limits to Catholics during Lent, when they are widely consumed in Latin America), and in a different effort to curb demand, the Grupo de los Cien partnered with Wildcoast and other groups to create a series of advertisements featuring sultry, bikini-clad bombshells. “My man doesn’t need turtle eggs,” reads the Spanish text. “Because he knows they don’t make him more potent.”

Pursuing this work in Mexico is not an idle decision, nor one for the faint of heart. While Aridjis was publishing his turtle reports, his home telephone was cut off every Thursday and reconnected on Tuesday, only to then go dead again two days later. The line was tapped when it was working at all. Poachers, who are often tied economically to the drug cartels, operate according to the same ethos, according to Aridjis: “Like the narco-traffickers, they say ‘plata o plomo’: silver or lead.”

Aridjis points to the case of Martha Lidia Díaz and Marco Antonio Barillo, two students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, who disappeared while volunteering to protect nesting Olive Ridley Sea Turtles on Pacific beaches in year 2003. Their efforts were interfering with local narcotics networks and they had begun receiving threatening phone calls after appearing on television in support of the turtles. And then, one day in September, they vanished. When Barillo’s body washed ashore, the cause of death was found to be beating, not drowning, yet there was no subsequent investigation of the apparent double homicide.

“Grass-roots activism has become more perilous in Mexico, as a result of the breakdown of the rule of law in areas where the drug cartels are influential. Some advocates have defended forests, farmlands and rivers at the cost of their own lives, with the killers never brought to justice,” Aridjis wrote in an op-ed for the *New York Times*. The poet and his family lived under the protection

“Grass-roots activism has become more perilous in Mexico.... Some advocates have defended forests, farmlands and rivers at the cost of their own lives, with the killers never brought to justice.”

of bodyguards for a year, in 1997, when Aridjis was working to protect a lagoon on the coast of Baja California Sur from a planned saltworks that would have destroyed important breeding and calving waters for Gray Whales.

Undaunted, Aridjis has continued to campaign on behalf of Mexico’s animals and indigenous people while maintaining a prodigious literary output. He has authored nearly 50 books—fiction and prose acclaimed by diverse luminaries from the surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel to the eminent journalist James Reston—and he served as president of PEN International, the global association of writers devoted to protecting freedom of expression, from 1997 to 2003. He has even written children’s books—his 2006 *The Search for Archelon: Odyssey of the Seven Turtles* describes a group of sea turtles on a semi-mythical quest to find their prehistoric ancestor.

His commitment is all the more impressive in light of how frequently legal protections are circumvented or outright ignored in Mexico. With the Monarch Butterflies, for instance, Aridjis discovered politicians approving commercial logging projects in the reserve as soon as it had been established. “It was not five days after the official decree, they gave permission to the companies to exploit the hills,” he said. “I became used to this double game from the authorities. With their mouths, they said that they were protecting; and with their hands, they were destroying.”

I asked him how he continues to work and maintain hope in these conditions. We had moved into the backyard garden, and the afternoon sun was shafting down through the leaves of a magnificent fig tree. “For me, the defense of the environment is a spiritual and moral commitment,” he said. “I am very pessimistic and very optimistic. I see that the forces of destruction are powerful, and that our fight is almost like a drop of water on a hot rock. It’s very difficult because human beings are greedy and they don’t respect life. In a country like Mexico, they don’t respect laws, they don’t respect rules, they don’t respect anything. But there are nice people, good people, too. I have to fight to do what I can to save these species, to save the planet. I have that responsibility as a human being. Even if the others destroy, I have to work to protect.”

He paused and looked up at the tree he had planted years ago that was now bearing fruit and broke into a wide smile. “It’s survival, you see.” 🌳