

HISTORY OF SEA TURTLES IN GUYANA

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It is probable that the indigenous peoples of Guyana, especially coastal Caribs in the northwestern coastal areas, have always had some knowledge of marine turtle populations in the area, but they left us no record to be sure of this. The various colonial powers – the Dutch, the French, the British – may also have made at least some observations of marine turtles in what is now Guyana, but again they seem to have failed to write about them. And it is a virtual certainty that, when the Arawak and Warrau people arrived from Venezuela and colonized the shores of northwestern Guyana, they were aware of marine turtles as a provider of edible eggs and as a source of meat also, with the additional advantages of being very large, ridiculously easy to catch at least when on land, and exceptionally tasty. But they too failed to keep diaries or records that have come down to us.

But, when I personally first visited Guyana in 1964, there were some interesting hints about turtles even though these were not written ones. In the Georgetown Museum, for a start, there was an adult olive ridley, well mounted by chief preparator Ram Singh. It was labeled “green turtle” – not an unreasonable assumption in that it was indeed green in color, and the olive ridley at the time had never been recorded in the western Atlantic. Moreover, there was another, younger and smaller specimen kept alive (in fresh water!) in the Georgetown Zoo. And in the subsequent years, Ram Singh and Balram Singh were able to create a small diorama that included a number of real green turtles, each about 30 cm long, and a hawksbill of around the same size, from specimens that were apparently brought in by shrimpers, who used to bring turtles to the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society (RACS), which operated the museum. Many, I subsequently learned, were brought, not as donations to the museum, but rather with a request for the museum’s preparators to stuff or mount the animals for a fee, to be kept as souvenirs.

I encountered further tangible evidence. Shell Beach, an enormous sandbank thirty miles or so southeast of Waini Point, featured on the available maps at the time, and was marked with an aircraft symbol, indicating the existence of some sort of landing strip during World War II. The last remnant of this outpost lasted for many years in the form of some high wooden pilings, giving the place the name of “Three Pile Beach,” and the name of another extant beach, “Iron Punt,” reflected the postwar persistence of what was probably a wartime metal freshwater tank or barge.

I did not find people in Georgetown who had been to Shell Beach, but a number had heard that marine turtles nested there, and I undertook a visit myself. It was already late summer, but I was assured that this was the turtle nesting time. It turned out that this was the very end of the season, and I only saw a single, huge green turtle nesting. But my timing was fortunate from another point of view: there had clearly been intensive slaughter of turtles for several months, and the evidence in the form of carapaces and skulls lying in the sun was abundant; I could see, not only what was nesting today, but what turtles had been emerging to nest for the whole season – and what had happened when they tried.

Examination showed that the turtles were nearly all cheloniids, with good numbers of three species – green, hawksbill, and olive ridley. Only one or two leatherbacks were in evidence. Bear in mind that these were the first South American nesting records for any of these species, except possibly the green turtle, although note also that, as I was gathering my data and specimens, Joop Schulz in Surinam was making parallel observations on the much more abundant sea turtles on the open coast and the Marowijne river beaches of Surinam.

Voucher specimens were collected, and are still available in the CRI collection and in the Florida Museum of Natural History. I returned the following year for a longer stay, although I was still late in the season, and during the three weeks I was on the beach, mostly hawksbills nested, together with a few greens and one ridley. It also gave me a chance to talk to some of the turtle hunters themselves, and a few turtles were actually killed while I was there.

For the next decade and a half, I visited the beach only sporadically, but I did find that the huge beach they called Shell Beach was washing away, and the turtle nesting now occurred on much narrower beaches, especially the newer ones not yet choked with beach morning-glory (*Ipomoea*). There were other visitors too, including representatives of the Cayman Turtle Farm, who had permission from the government to collect a number of adult greens for transportation to Grand Cayman, for breeding stock for their commercial enterprise. Their written records indicate that there was an abundance of camps full of turtle hunters waiting to kill every turtle that emerged from the sea. It makes for grisly reading.

Efforts to bring about protection of the nesting turtles by governmental action failed to achieve results. The concept of providing field officers for such an enterprise was too new, the place too remote, and the idea that indigenous peoples should be restrained from what was essentially a food-gathering activity was politically unacceptable. There was some other, casual hunting during these years, including methodical nightly hunting patrols by the beach-based caretakers of equipment for an offshore oil exploration effort by Continental Oil. Sometimes, it seems a miracle that the turtles survived at all.

By the late 1980s, I started to return to Guyana, and Larry Ogren and Henk Reichart did some surveys for the West Atlantic Turtle Symposiums during those years too. However, no tangible conservation action resulted until I was able to form a partnership with Audley James and his family, and initiate a highly successful program of gentle restraint of the turtle hunting effort by means of peer pressure from members of their own community at Santa Rosa. Such techniques of helping selected hunters become the guardians of their resource are commonplace today, but ours was a pioneering effort that proved itself well and was sustainable. By the 1990s the beaches of Guyana were no longer littered with dead turtles by the close of the nesting season. The hunters still existed, of course, and still hunted turtles on occasion, but we tried to have a presence in the best nesting areas, and this was sufficient to deter most hunters from risking embarrassing confrontations; they preferred to operate elsewhere, or even to stay home.

We continued with many new initiatives – aerial surveys, alternative meat programs for the former turtle hunters, and educational programs based in the Moruka communities where most of the hunters lived. We brought youngsters out to the beaches to enjoy a week of summer camp and learn about the turtles and the environment as a whole – and we still do this.

In 1994, at the suggestion of Russell Mittermeier of Conservation International, I prepared and submitted a proposal to the World Bank to develop and manage the northwestern coast of Guyana as a nationally protected area. However it was a decade before this bore fruit, a delay stemming from the absence of a governmental infrastructure to support such an effort in Guyana, as well as changing personnel within the World Bank itself. But now the effort has shown some recrudescence. Annual declarations of no-net-fishing areas are made, in that incidental capture of leatherbacks in near-shore gillnets is a problem in some years. Guyana now has an EPA, the Guyana Marine Turtle Protection Society has been designated the lead agency for development of the Shell Beach Protected Area, World Wildlife Fund has made money available for a number of years to consolidate and expand the beach effort, and a wide variety of different levels of actual protection for lands within the nominal Protected Area System has been established. The task is an uphill one, in that the concept of a protected area is still a new one to most citizens of Guyana and the indigenous people themselves foresee restraints or clashes over issues of traditional hunting rights and their long-standing land-title claims. The program is vital for

Guyana to join the ranks of nearly all nations in the world in having a protected area system, and it has an unusual advantage in that the habitats of Guyana have not been destroyed or developed as they have in so many countries, but we do not anticipate retirement of our beach protection area just yet.

Most of the northwestern beach area and all of the inland area between the coast and the Waini River are uninhabited (and virtually uninhabitable), and this may facilitate the declaration of the area as protected. But the years are passing – a decade already since I first filed my proposal to the World Bank - - and settlers have moved in to both ends of the Pomeroon to Waini coast, not only around our own former camp at Almond Beach, but also at Gwennie Beach, a good turtle beach in some seasons, and accessible on foot from the Moruka communities. Those at Almond Beach have little everyday connection with turtles, although they are not above collecting the occasional nest laid in this area and may incidentally catch some turtles in their gillnets. However, in years of good nesting such as the year 2000, Gwennie Beach has been the scene of large-scale leatherback hunting.

The crux of the contemporary challenge is that we are moving with the times, institutionalizing conservation as a governmental responsibility instead of a catch-as-catch-can private effort, but we are also imposing what is essentially a developed world conservation model on a developing country. Our recent history of “voluntary conservation” by peer pressure within a community has worked pretty well, and with more support could work even better. All efforts are being made to define and apply the new protected area constraints with a gentle hand, but fundamental questions remain: in the last analysis. Will there be legal constraints, sanctions, and even punishment for those who break the rules? These will be politically difficult to achieve, yet without them there really will be nothing that could be called a “protected area.” Many will be won over and will cooperate with the protected area regulations, and it is planned for as many as possible to actually have employment within the system; but even a handful of non-cooperators can undo all the good that the majority may achieve.

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