

The Truth about Turtles (part 3) - 15.04.2013

Since the days of Malavois ...

Conservationists and politicians do not always find themselves in agreement, but we were delighted to read Mr James Mancham's gracious Letter to the Editor (Seychelles Nation, April 9, 2013) following our exchange concerning the effectiveness and importance of protecting turtles in Seychelles.



It is very gratifying to learn that he admires and supports the dedicated work of ICS (Island Conservation Society) and others involved in Seychelles conservation.

Although serious turtle protection in Seychelles began relatively recently, the first recommendations for the conservation of this resource date from a long way back. Over two centuries ago, in 1787, Jean-Baptiste de Malavois warned that "la tortue de mer (green turtle) devient de jour en jour plus rare dans les Isles Seychelles", and recommended that "il serait convenable de défendre aux habitants, très expressément et sans réserve, d'en faire la pêche..." He was just as concerned about the over-exploitation of the hawksbill turtle: "L'interdiction de cette pêche ... est donc on ne peut pas plus sage..."

Very early in the 20th century there was legislation (Ordinances 16 of 1901 and 2 of 1904, revised as Ordinances 5 of 1925 and 5 of 1929) that specified minimum sizes for both green and hawksbill that could be hunted, prohibited the taking of buried eggs, banned the use of torches for night-hunting and the hunting of turtles within 1,000 metres of the high water line, etc. Needless to say, these partial measures were difficult to enforce and turtle stocks continued to decline. In fact, the real focus of this legislation was not so much to protect the turtles as to protect the rights of the land owners to the turtles on their property.

Government Notice 452 of 1948 and then the Female Turtles Protection Regulations of 1962 introduced the concept of a closed season during which green turtles could not be taken. The 1968 Green Turtle Protection Regulations introduced a complete ban on the hunting of green turtles, but in 1976 this was revised to allow an open season on males from March 1 to October 31, timed to coincide with the peak of nesting activity, from June to August.

The situation did not improve. As an example of the state of affairs back then, a biologist who visited Assomption in 1973 estimated that close to 100% of the females that nested on the island were killed. He described this as "outright rape of a resource". In fact, closed seasons are very difficult to enforce for sea turtles. Meat can be salted and shell can be stored for years if necessary, making it impossible to know during which month a turtle was killed.

During historical periods when the laws protected only female turtles in Seychelles, typically male turtles were sent to Mahé while the females were consumed in the outer islands.

It was only in 1994, finally, that the Wild Animals (Turtles) Protection Regulations declared that no person may disturb, catch, injure, kill, sell, purchase or keep any turtle or turtle egg. Moreover, under that legislation, it became illegal for anyone to possess, sell or purchase turtle shell in any form without a special permit.

The main point we wish to make here is that there has been a long build-up in legislation to protect our sea turtle populations, based on clear evidence that stocks were dwindling, and in the 1970s onwards international organisations like the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) were also campaigning for turtle conservation. Hence, in our view, to simply refer to "the pressure of the British government" is an over-simplification of the historical context. The pressure was broad based and from both external and internal sources.

Pro-conservationists in Seychelles too deserve credit for the laws passed in the 1970s onwards, banning the killing and consumption of turtles. There has been recognition that turtles are more valuable to the country alive rather than dead – in our first article in this series we stressed their economic importance as an attraction for tourists.

There is hope now that future generations too will be able to observe what has fascinated even poets:

"As though the weight of a thousand generations
had been laid across its back,
the black form rose between the waves,
pulling itself onto midnight sand..."

Contributed by Pat Matyot, Dr Jeanne A. Mortimer, & Adrian Skerrett of the Island Conservation Society (ICS)