

The truth about turtles (part 1) - 01.04.2013 (Response to Mr James Mancham's Letter to the Editor of 26.02.2013)

There has been a lot of attention on sea turtles recently. On March 14 a Seychelloise was jailed for three months in Singapore for trying to smuggle 60 kilos of hawksbill turtle shell into that country -- a quantity of shell representing no fewer than 42 adult hawksbills.



Prior to that, on February 26 the Seychelles Nation published a letter from Mr James Mancham which appeared to question the need for legislation protecting sea turtles in Seychelles. In his letter, Mr Mancham lamented the fact that Seychellois no longer have legal access to fresh and salted green turtle meat, and that the local hawksbill shell craft industry no longer exists. Mr Mancham suggests that Chinese industrialists regularly eat sea turtle meat in Beijing restaurants, and that we need "an international law which is respected and enforceable by all nations so that no one has the opportunity of enjoying quality turtle meat at the expense of the Seychellois people and/or the inhabitants of other Island States or coastal zones".

In fact, such international legislation does already exist under the terms of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) to which more than 175 nations are signatories -- including Seychelles, China, and Singapore. The Seychelloise was arrested in Singapore because her actions contravened the CITES agreement which forbids all international commercial trade in sea turtle products. One of the reasons that Seychelles passed protective legislation in 1994 banning the slaughter of sea turtles was that the then ongoing export of raw and crafted tortoiseshell from Seychelles contravened the CITES agreement signed by Seychelles in 1977.

Transgressions of CITES such as those reported by Mr Mancham do occasionally occur. But, does that mean legislation protecting turtles in Seychelles and other coastal states ought to be dismantled? Murder and robbery are both illegal, but occasionally occur. Should we legalise murder and theft because compliance is not 100 percent?

The Republic of Seychelles is recognised as a global leader in environmental conservation and as a champion of biodiversity and endangered species. Our green image is highly compatible with our tourism industry which now accounts for more than 60 percent of our foreign exchange earnings and at least 40 percent of the national work force.

Mr Mancham's letter and press coverage of the turtle shell smuggling case failed to mention the importance of turtles as an asset for our tourism industry – what we could term as the "non-consumptive recreational value" of these animals. True, tourists and their activities need to be controlled to prevent them from having negative consequences for turtle populations.

But the desire that tourists have to see wildlife in its natural state is of great economic value. Many of them see our tortoisier and kare as "a source of living wonder and of curiosity". Visitors to Seychelles love having the opportunity to see these marine reptiles crawling ashore to nest; or emerging from the

nest and heading towards the sea as baby turtles. Tim Ecott, in his bestselling book *Neutral Buoyancy – Adventures in a Liquid World*, describes finding a turtle skeleton on Farquhar before going on to enthuse: “To swim underwater with a turtle is one of the greatest privileges granted to a diver.

To quietly observe the animal feeding, crunching its way into a piece of coral growth, and then see it raise its head and stare back, is an emotional experience... To swim at a respectful distance from a turtle and match its pace without making it fearful is to fall in love, charmed by ancient eyes...”

Clearly, our sea turtles have attributes that make them a valuable resource for ecotourism development. Seychelles has long recognised that ecotourism assets need to be protected. Mr Mancham declines any praise for such foresight in the case of sea turtles, preferring to credit “the pressure of the British Government that laws were passed in Seychelles”. As we will see in parts two and three of our response, the history of turtle protection in Seychelles is more complex.

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