

POLITICAL PROBLEMS FOR THE CAYMAN TURTLE FARM: WHICH WAY CONSERVATION?

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A curious and disturbing attack has been made on the Cayman Turtle Farm which may affect its prospects of survival. The British Government has permitted the import of the Farm's products into Britain, on the grounds that the turtles are captive bred or captive reared from eggs taken legally from the wild before March, 1978. The UK Department of the Environment has also attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the United States Government to lift its ban on products from the Farm, as the US market is vital to its success. The ban applies not only to the sale of the Farm's products within the United States, but also prohibits shipment of the products through US ports to other destinations; this is a serious problem for the Farm. However, the apparently reasonable approach by the British Government's scientific advisers, an approach which is endorsed by many other conservationists, has met with great criticism from the more extreme factions of the conservation movement which appear to be opposed to the Turtle Farm in principle. Two articles campaigning against the farm have appeared in the *New Scientist* magazine. The nature and methods of criticism are extraordinary and alarming, and deserve close examination.

An article reporting the controversy, entitled "No end to Trade in Turtles", by Jeremy Cherfas, appeared in the *New Scientist* on 13th December, 1979. Cherfas outlined the views of the British Government, i.e. that the Government was satisfied that the Cayman Turtle Farm met the criteria for a farm as outlined by the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (abbreviated as CITES). The article then lists a number of arguments against the Farm. John Burton, of "TRAFFIC", claimed that the Farm did not meet the CITES criteria because it was not a closed operation, despite the fact that the Farm deposited an affidavit in the US to the effect that it has taken no eggs from the wild since March, 1978, and does not intend to take eggs from the wild again. Nicol Duplaix, of TRAFFIC's US office actually accused the Farm of buying "wild" turtle meat from Ecuador, packing it in Farm labelled tins, and re-exporting it as farmed meat. This last accusation did the Turtle Farm a great deal of harm, and was later found to be totally baseless; it seems that it was merely used in a dubious attempt to discredit the Turtle Farm.

The Cherfas article also states that though the Farm "may now be approaching the point where it is truly a self-sufficient farm rather than a ranch for rearing wild caught animals", "conservationists" object to the Farm on other grounds. It seems to us that these grounds have no relevance to the conservation issue and are in fact trivial and spurious. These issues are: that it sets a bad example in using high protein food for turtles, food which could be used directly to "nourish hungry people"; that the farm employs few people; is capital intensive; that "the end product is so expensive that only wealthy people can afford to buy it". All this, it is claimed, is "unthinking exploitation". We would like to examine these points individually:

1. Why is using high protein food for turtles a bad example? This implies that the food used for the turtles is directly depriving hungry people. This implication is absurd, since the feeding of high protein pellet food is standard practice in modern livestock husbandry throughout the world.
2. The statement that the Farm employs few people is untrue; in fact the Farm is one of the biggest local employers on Grand Cayman, in an area of poor natural resources. The people of the Cayman Islands have historically been dependent on the sea and turtle fishing for their livelihoods, and turtle farming gives some hope of continuing employment

in this tradition, without affecting wild populations, in the face of dwindling natural resources.

3. That the Farm is "capital intensive" is used by Cherfas as grounds for criticism. "Capital intensive" merely means that the owners have had the courage to spend a considerable amount of money on this project. To this point the Farm has given no return on the money invested because of its experimental nature. It is beyond our comprehension why this private expenditure should be a source of "worry" for "most conservationists".

4. "The end product is so expensive that only wealthy people can afford to buy it". Not only is this irrelevant to conservation, it is also an exaggeration. One of us (ST) ate turtle meat in a Caymanian eating house, frequented by local people, at a price comparable to Beef. Of course, the price at Harrods in London will be another matter. Prices, as everyone knows, are determined by supply and demand.

A further argument used against the Farm is that it took 15 years to reach its present position, during which time it supported itself by processing turtles and eggs from the wild. Its success in breeding and raising turtles has allegedly encouraged other people to start similar enterprises in other parts of the world, expecting "15 years grace during which time they will take turtles from the wild". Current international law makes this impossible. The Cayman Turtle Farm was the first of its kind, and took its original stock legally from the wild before current international restrictions were implemented.

A further article in the New Scientist, by Jeremy Cherfas, appeared on 27th March, 1980, and raises several more dubious arguments. Originally, CITES permitted trade in endangered species if they were captive bred. Later, at a meeting of member states in Costa Rica, March 1979, "captive bred" was defined as "the offspring of parents that mated in captivity, providing that the breeding herd has been shown to be able to produce two successive generations in captivity". This is being used as an argument against permitting trade in farm products, because the Farm's captive bred turtles are not yet old enough to produce second generations. As it is only a matter of time before this occurs, and as all parties in this controversy are aware of this, it seems extraordinary that this should be used as a serious argument against the Turtle Farm. This seems especially unfair as until the meeting of March 1979, the Farm was working on the understanding that its products would comply with the CITES regulations.

The Turtle Farm no longer takes eggs from the wild; this is established beyond doubt. Yet Cherfas seems to begrudge this fact, neither agreeing or disagreeing with it, only stating that "It is true that turtles are breeding there. In the future, its turtles may qualify as captive bred under the CITES. But they do not qualify yet". He states that turtles being marketed now were hatched in 1976, and in that year the Farm took 25,500 eggs from the wild in Surinam against 15,186 eggs from its own breeding herd. He uses this as an argument against the Farm trading now, despite the fact that he knows no eggs are now taken from the wild. This is a classic case of retrospective legislation. International law permitted the turtle farm to take eggs and turtles from the wild for breeding and commercial raising stock. We now have the ridiculous situation where the farm has legally reared the stock to a marketable size, but is now not to be allowed to sell its products. This grossly unfair method of legislation, which immediately threatens the existence of the Farm, we are pleased to say is not practised (by a long tradition) by the British Government.

It is lamentable that the Farm's achievement in being totally self-sufficient in eggs does not seem to be worthy of mention. Cherfas only refers to the fact that for another two years "at least", some of the turtles sold will not have been captive bred. He refers to the lower fertility of captive raised females as opposed to wild caught females, it being about half that of eggs from wild caught females. Of course the Turtle Farm is acutely aware of the problem, and is working to solve it, but no credit is given them for this.

Cherfas's article ends with a quote from a spokesman of the Department of the Environment, who said that the Department "was satisfied that they have been taking steps to

comply" with CITES. "Although they won't have completed the full cycle until 1982 we are prepared to back them until then". In our view, this is a perfectly reasonable and constructive approach by people who obviously have the interests of sea turtles at heart, and theirs is the correct attitude.

It will be noted that the arguments used against the farm are negative; it is plain from the persistent use of comparatively trivial arguments, in the absence of more serious and genuine grievances, that the Farm's critics do not wish to find solutions to the problems, and seem opposed in principle to turtle farming. It is significant that in his first article Cherfas quoted the accusation about the Farm "laundering" turtle meat from Ecuador; this serious allegation was found later to be untrue, but he does not mention this in his second article, as he may have been expected to, in fairness to the Turtle Farm and the Department of the Environment.

Some people, including members of this Society, may object to the farming of turtles on philosophical grounds, as they would to the farming of any other animals for meat, and this is a view anyone is entitled to. Our own view is that in present circumstances the commercial farming of sea turtles will, on balance, benefit the turtles, directly by ensuring the survival of the species if it should meet with its tragic extinction in the wild; also by providing a future source of animals for restocking experiments in the wild. The Turtle Farm, though a commercial venture, has never been a profitable one, but has been kept going at least partly by the owners' interest in the survival of turtles. The Farm needs encouragement and the co-operation of the scientific community, not harassment by it. We hope that the constructive attitude of the British Government will prevail against the current strange and negative tide of opinion. The turtles and the farm deserve better.

The pioneer of sea turtle conservation, Professor Archie Carr, in his book "So Excellent a Fische", on the subject of sea turtles and the future, states "The one move that appears most promising as a way to accomplish the dual aim of feeding people and saving natural turtle populations is to set up turtle farms".