

## ARE SEA TURTLES THREATENED BY SOME CONSERVATIONISTS ?

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In this issue of the Bulletin we have given a large amount of space to the subject of Sea Turtle farming and conservation. This is because there have been recent developments of a political nature which are of unusual importance for sea turtle conservation and farming: developments which may have far reaching consequences not only for the future of sea turtles but for the future integrity of the conservation movement and for the principles of the breeding of any wild animal for any purpose in captivity.

Certain individuals and conservation organisations have been actively and vociferously campaigning against the existence of the Cayman Island Turtle Farm; few measures have been spared in the attempt to ensure the commercial failure and eventual closure of the farm. An account of the Farm and its political problems was given in the last issue of the Bulletin (No. 1, June 1980: see *Observations and Notes on the Captive Breeding of the Green Sea Turtle, Chelonia mydas, on Grand Cayman, British West Indies*, by Simon Townson and *Political Problems for the Cayman Turtle Farm: Which Way Conservation?* by John Pickett and Simon Townson). More substantial detail is given in two papers in this issue: *Cayman Turtle Farm Ltd., the Crock of Gold* by W.A. Johnson and *Turtle Farms and Ranching* by Professor L.D. Brongersma.

The arguments used against turtle farming are hard to understand, and very disturbing; their nature is wholly negative and their effect, it seems to us, will be to do grievous harm to turtle populations by making impossible the application of rational conservation measures. The articles in this issue give ample illustration of the critical problems facing turtle conservation, and indicate the sensible balance of measures which would achieve success. They show well that a constructive and positive line can be taken. However, the people who propose these constructive measures are in a minority, and because at present the more negative ideas prevail, and obtain most publicity, their chances of application are slim. Influential bodies such as the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society, Friends of the Earth, and TRAFFIC wish to see a moratorium on all trade in turtle products, to include those produced in genuine farms. This would be most inappropriate, because existing international controls allow for trade in farmed or ranched products and the governments and people of the countries concerned have a real vested interest in the survival of sea turtles; there is incentive for effective protection and conservation of remaining populations, as exemplified by the ranching operation in Surinam and the Cayman Turtle Farm. This has been shown to work. If such operations are not permitted to exist, then the future for sea turtles is plain. Real incentives for national protection would be removed; thereafter conservation would depend only on ethics or moral principle. In the difficult human circumstances current in the areas in question – political instability, weakness of government control and law enforcement, pressure for commercial development of beach areas, general impoverishment – reliance on human virtue alone is extremely unlikely to work. The strongest protection that can be given by the most exceptionally determined governments is that of armed soldiers patrolling nesting beaches. The only instance when such a measure has been taken is in Mexico. This has been ineffective. Archie Carr, in a report in the Marine Turtle Newsletter (*Encounter at Escobilla*, Marine Turtle Newsletter No. 13, Nov., 1979) states that the armed protection by marines of the laying beaches of the Olive Ridley in Oaxaca has become lax, and in some cases the marines assigned to the work had not been effective. It can be expected that this most extreme form of protection will be given to turtles only in rare instances. Local predation will effectively be unchecked: nominal conservation laws in countries where people have little motivation for obeying them, and national controls are weak, have little chance of success. Most of the countries concerned will be preoccupied with other more pressing affairs. Finance is lacking. The international conservation organisations,

both voluntary and official, are unlikely themselves to be able to fund the measures which would be necessary on such an extensive a scale. An international trade moratorium, stringently and effectively enforced by the Customs authorities of the rich importing nations would not be sufficient: local consumption in the countries of origin, so difficult to prevent, is enough alone to bring extinction. So how will the turtles then be saved?

Farming and ranching seems, plainly, the best hope of encouraging real and meaningful protection of turtles and, if given the chance, will grow to dominate trade because of the predictability of supply and the quality and standardised nature of its products. As Professor Brongersma points out, we are here dealing with a domesticated animal. Probably, never in all History could the domestication of an animal have met with such opposition. Fortunately, on the subject of farming we are not working in the dark. Besides the remarkable achievement of Cayman Turtle Farm in the establishment of a self-sustaining captive breeding colony of the Green Turtle, we have the example of Crocodile farming: within a period of a few years it has become phenomenally successful, and shows what can be done when constructive policies are applied. Young crocodilians have been produced in abundance for restocking programmes (the Gharial has been brought back from the edge of extinction), leather is produced for the demands of trade, employment is created, and the public is educated. The farming of Crocodiles has shown that it can be done without indirectly harming wild populations by stimulating an increased trade in illicit crocodile products, which is one of the chief fears and strongest arguments of the opponents of turtle farming. The breeding of turtles is in a broad way not dissimilar to breeding crocodiles; both are long lived and prolific, both are critically endangered, crocodiles perhaps the more immediately so; both are important in trade, and both have shown themselves to be amenable to management in captivity. However, crocodile farms have been able to establish themselves without the intense opposition which has done so much harm to the Cayman Turtle Farm and which, if continued, will retard progress, or worse, in the conservation of marine turtles.

An argument repeatedly used by the opponents of turtle farming is that there is no hope of farms meeting the world demand for turtle products in the foreseeable future, and that by the time they could do so some species may be beyond recall. They say that as the farms cannot achieve the point of supplying 100% of world demand soon enough, and that their continued existence would make it difficult to control illegitimate trade, they should be outlawed. In fact, the Cayman Turtle Farm supplies 10% of world demand – a significant proportion for a single farm. It would seem quite possible, in view of this, if a concentrated effort is made, to establish new farms modelled on Cayman Turtle Farm to reach the desired level of supply. As it is an emergency for the turtles, the Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species could make special exception, for a limited time, to the new definition of “captive bred”, to allow new farms to sell first generation stock (CITES at present only allows trading of captive bred stock of a population shown to be capable of producing second generation offspring).

These new enterprises could be overseered by international conservation bodies to avoid any risk of false accusation, or of abuse. Because of Cayman Turtle Farm's success in developing the technology of breeding turtles in captivity, the time needed for the establishment of new farms would be much shorter than that taken by itself. It surely cannot be too difficult for means to be found to correctly identify farm produce at international ports, and ensure that illegal wild-caught turtle products are not smuggled, or at least reduce illegal produce to an insignificant fraction, as with all contraband in international commerce. An influential section of the conservation movement has lost much time and consumed a great deal of energy in its illogical harassment of Cayman Turtle Farm. This energy could have been applied, and can be still, to the encouragement and enlargement of farming and other rational conservation measures. The issue is urgent; boldness and imagination are required. If this line is taken, there is a certain future for marine turtles, and it may yet bring back “the fleets which Columbus found”, a return which Archie Carr so eloquently longed for in his book “The Windward Road”.

It seems to us that the alternative to this policy is hopeless, such a long shot as to be beyond consideration by sensible men. The broader implications for conservation are also bad. In the sad story of the campaign against the Cayman Turtle Farm we have seen the wilful suppression of facts and distortion of truth: this is a disgrace to science and puts in danger the integrity of conservationists in general. This is not the path of progress. Also, if the same irrational principles are applied to other conservation fields, are we to see the dismantling of farms for all kinds of other animals? Will the captive breeding of any wild animal be steadily outlawed? This may, now, seem incredible, but the logical extension of the principles now prevailing would be so. This is a bad omen for the future.