

16 October 1979

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

JOINT SPC-NMFS WORKSHOP ON MARINE TURTLES

IN THE TROPICAL PACIFIC ISLANDS

(Noumea, New Caledonia, 11 - 14 December 1979)

THE TURTLE STATUS IN TUVALU

by E. Pita
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Fisheries Division
Tuvalu

SUMMARY

Turtles have never been regarded in the past in Tuvalu as animals which needed to be protected. The islands of the country have a turtle resource that needs to be quantified through detailed survey. To date no legislation has been passed to protect turtles. The people hunt these animals during the turtle seasons. Although turtle meat is much preferred to imported meat, this trend is evident only in the outer islands. Turtle farming has been carried out in the past but it is very unlikely this will become commercial in future.

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INTRODUCTION

Long before the Europeans came to the Western Pacific, the Ellice Islanders now called Tuvaluans, lived mainly on a subsistence diet of fish, coconuts, breadfruit and root-crops. Turtles were then regarded as exceptionally favoured seafood.

Nowadays, with the importation of refrigerated goods, the consumption of turtle meat is very rare, particularly in the capital, Funafuti. However, in the outer islands, where no refrigeration facilities are available, turtle meat is still a favourite dish and people hunt any turtle seen in the lagoon, reef, or coming ashore for nesting. Hence there is a danger of these animals from becoming extinct in future.

TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS

From the recorded traditional customs there is no mention of customs relating to the protection of these animals. However, the old people in the villages do know the life cycles of turtles and often advise the young people where and when to make hunting trips to the islets several miles from the villages. They either catch them in the lagoons from their canoes, by diving for them, or with the use of nets specially made to trap the turtles on the outer reefs and during high tides (spring tides). These people also can tell where the eggs have been laid. The eggs are usually taken back to the village; some are left to hatch by burying them in sand outside the village houses; others are eaten.

The turtle shells are used for making lures for bonito fishing by pole-and-line.

Turtle farming is known to have been carried out by the local people in one of the islands of Tuvalu, at Niulakita. This is the most southerly situated island and the most isolated one. It is the highest above sea-level, sandy and oval shaped, with two internal ponds. The first inhabitants of this island used to culture turtles in the two ponds and harvest the turtles during their traditional feasts.

Other islands in the group, with passages and lagoons are also known to have nesting areas for turtles and hunting trips are often undertaken throughout the year.

TURTLE SPECIES

Two kinds of turtles are known to be present in Tuvalu. These can be easily identified by the patterns of scales on the head and back, shape of the mouth and overall size, shape and colour of the whole animal.

The most common species found in Tuvalu is the green turtle (Chelonia mydas). These are often seen floating in the sea near the reefs, centre of the lagoon, or feeding on weed in lagoon shallows.

The other species found is the hawksbill turtle (Eretmochelys imbricata) which is often found feeding on shells and small animals round the reefs. This species is found very rarely and is often of a small size.

PRESENT STATUS

In Tuvalu no survey or work has been carried out by the Fisheries Division or other institutions to establish the species and their abundance. However, people hunt for turtles during the season, especially in three of the outer islands. They use powered boats and an average of 20-30 turtles are caught per month. On the capital, Funafuti, people usually go out to islets and await the turtles coming ashore for nesting. At times they catch the turtles and even collect all the eggs laid. In addition, it is becoming a practice to use spears to hunt turtles in the lagoon or in the outer reefs.

These activities, if allowed to continue, would be a big pressure on the turtle stocks and if left unchecked could result in serious depletion, if not destruction, of these animals. In Tuvalu, no legislation or by-law exists prohibiting the killing of turtles, particularly those coming ashore for nesting.

CONCLUSION

It is vitally important that some legislation or by-laws be passed prohibiting the hunting of female turtles. A survey should be carried out by the Fisheries Division to quantify the resource and to identify the species as well as the future culture of these animals for the domestic market only.
