



# To Live or not To Live

By WAYNE WITZELL

Photos by author

Considering it was only 0930 hours, it was sweltering hot. Our tiny motor boat skidded through the Pacific swell into the glare of the morning sun. With Alan Banner at the helm and me bailing water, we approached a small deserted island off the eastern coast of Western Samoa — our destination. We were inspecting the beach for hawksbill turtle eggs but found, instead, two sets of turtle tracks which never made it to the nesting area. Turtle and human footprints intersected with cataclysmic results, signs of struggle and the reptilian blood of

death. We silently made our way back home.

The Fisheries Division of Western Samoa, under the supervision of William Travis, initiated a sea turtle program late in 1971 in an attempt to study, and possibly help, the already depleted hawksbill population. The project was built and originally operated by two Peace Corps volunteers, Alan Banner and myself, plus a Samoan assistant, Viliamu Matagi who is the present Project Manager.

Every morning an expedition is sent out to the three island beaches to bring back fresh hawksbill eggs before the Samoan fish-

- Author and assistant are ready to begin measuring and tagging male hawksbill turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata*.





*Painless method of identification will result in increased knowledge about migration, nesting.*

ermen destroy them. Unfortunately, we are not always first to the eggs and the turtle population is rapidly being exterminated. All eggs brought in by our beach patrol are transplanted to the mainland hatchery where they are kept under constant surveillance.

After emergence, the hatchlings are placed into one of several concrete tanks and fed fresh sea food for approximately one month before being released. We cannot keep the turtles much longer than a month due to the logistical problem of obtaining an adequate food supply for many hundreds of turtles over a sustained period of time. Also, the hatchlings easily become conditioned to human feeding if extreme care is not taken. At the end of the month in captivity, the turtles have gained much weight, have grown considerably, and are strong swimmers and divers. The turtles are taken two to five miles outside the reef at dusk and released in small groups with twenty to fifty meters between groups.

Such a conservation project is primarily aimed at predation reduction in the early life

stages of the hawksbill. The long list of predators includes many different species of rats, crabs, birds, reef and oceanic fishes.



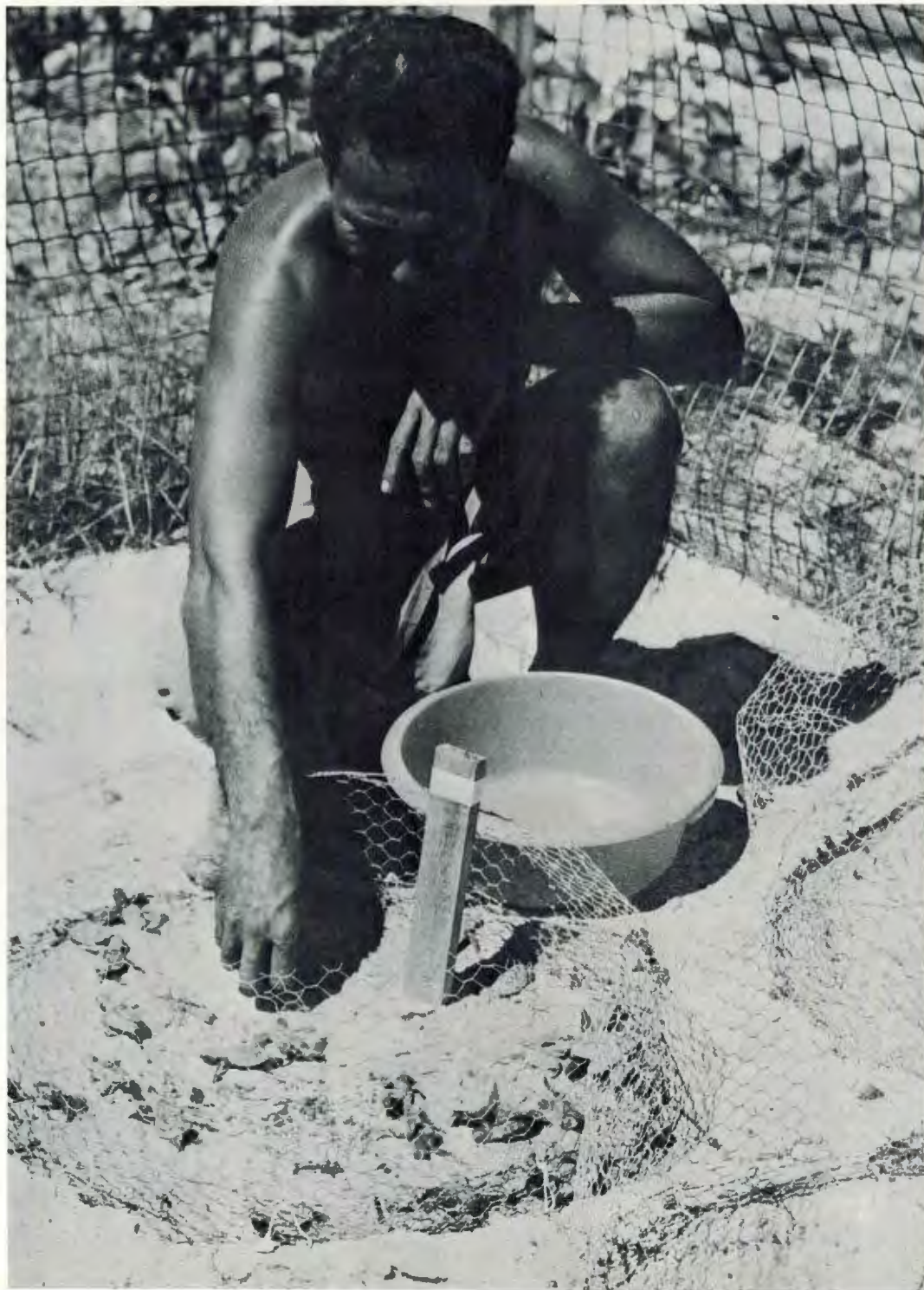
*Hatchlings are kept in these holding tanks until old enough to survive life in the open sea.*

Human predation upon the eggs is by far the most destructive. By reducing these predation pressures, through the releasing of strong turtles, we are hoping to quadruple the present survival rate of the hatchlings and replenish the turtle stocks around Samoa.

A large part of the turtle program is that of informing the Samoan people about turtles

and conservation. For a project like this one to be successful at all, the people must understand a little about the life history of the hawksbill, how it has been thrown out of balance by the people themselves, and how our project is helping to correct this imbalance.

The lack of modern public service equipment, plus the language and cultural bar-





*LEFT: Hatchery manager, Viliamu Matagi, collects newly emerged hatchlings from protected nesting area. ABOVE: Turtle float in 10th Western Samoan Independence Parade emphasizes theme of "Save Our Turtles". Through education programs, public is told of conservation needs.*

riers, make such a public information task almost impossible. All of the schools in the turtle nesting area are being approached first with pamphlets, lectures and visits to the hatchery site. The schools are then given two small turtles, for a science demonstration project, which they take care of for two months and then release. Some schools have also been given egg clutches for hatching as an added scientific project. A short 8mm movie has just been finished which will sup-

plement our school education program and also form the nucleus of our attack on the adult population.

The success of the public information program is hard to judge at this time but we have gotten excellent response from several schools, especially those which have had the most exposure to the project. One school even built a twenty foot papier maché turtle for the 10th Samoan Independence parade and handed out SAVE OUR TURTLES leaflets!



*Many turtles, such as this one, are carefully photographed as well as being measured and tagged.*

