

THE SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION FISHERIES NEWSLETTER

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SEA TURTLES: A SHARED RESOURCE OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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In Tokelau it is traditional for captured sea turtles to be divided among the entire village through a system known as 'inati' - an equitable method of sharing. Turtles are considered to be sacred fish and therefore may not be taken for personal use. Violations seldom occur, but when they do the punishment consists of public scolding and shame to one's family that can last for generations. As a shared resource, turtles make an important contribution to the nutritional and social well-being of the Tokelau people. The quality of atoll life would surely be lessened if turtles could no longer be found in Tokelau.

Sea turtles throughout the Pacific are also a shared resource, but not as the result of tradition, or agreements between island people. The shared status of turtles is due instead to the species' own biological characteristics, foremost of which involve regular migrations over great spans of ocean. These voyages are best known to occur between ancestral breeding sites and scattered resident foraging areas. The accompanying map illustrates migrations that have been documented by attaching flipper tags to turtles at several Pacific locations. Relatively few turtles have ever been tagged in the South Pacific Commission area, so the movements shown undoubtedly represent only a small proportion of what actually occurs. Nevertheless, some of the longest sea turtle migrations in the world have been recorded here in the Pacific.

There are two purposes for compiling and publishing this impressive map. First, it serves to graphically demonstrate that sea turtles are indeed a resource shared among widely separated areas. Secondly, it will help to emphasise that some reasonable conservation measures must be undertaken by all those who share in the resource if it is expected to endure. Turtles are extremely vulnerable and easy to catch when they converge at their breeding sites and come ashore to nest. Even at the resident foraging areas turtles can now be captured more efficiently due to the use of outboard motors and modern fishing gear. At some locations this problem has been recognised and conservation practices have been implemented or reinforced. However, a more widespread effort is needed if we are to prevent this valuable but limited resource from eroding further, and possibly being lost to future generations of Pacific people.

SOURCES USED TO ASSEMBLE THIS MIGRATION MAP

Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*)

from Scilly (Manuae), French Polynesia

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from Rangiroa, French Polynesia

Doumenge, F. (1973). Development of the 'Turtle Project' in French Polynesia. *The South Pacific Islands Fisheries Newsletter* 10: 37-39, Noumea: South Pacific Commission.

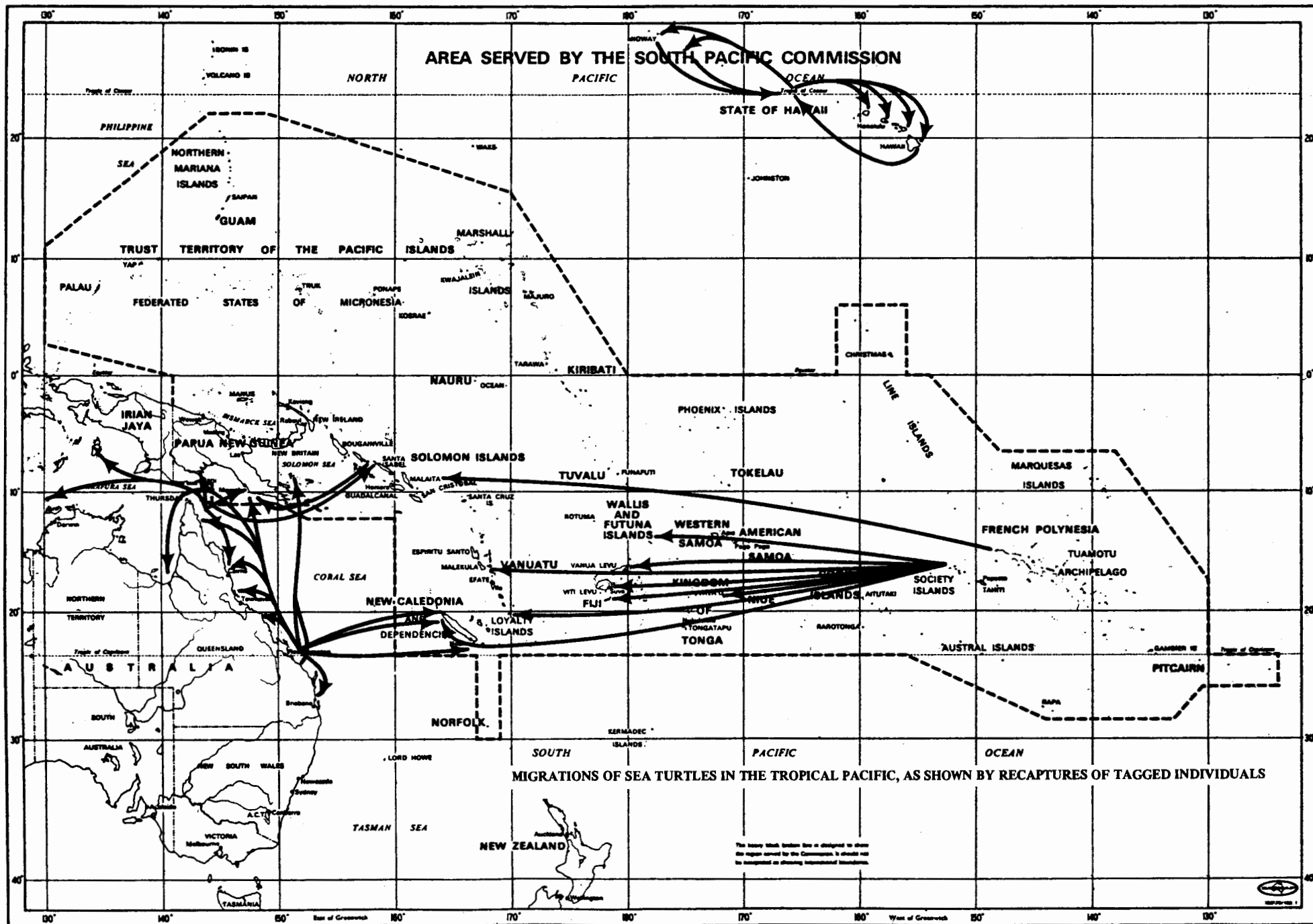
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Limpus, C.J. (1980). The green turtle in eastern Australia. In Management of turtle resources. *Research Monograph* 1, Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland.

from French Frigate Shoals, Hawaii

Balazs, G.H. (1979). Synopsis of biological data on the green turtle in the Hawaiian Islands. Working Paper 13, Joint SPC/NMFS Workshop on Marine Turtle in the Tropical Pacific Islands. Noumea: South Pacific Commission.



Hawksbills (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

from Arnavon Islands (Manning Strait), Solomon Islands

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Loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*)

from Heron Is. and Mon Repos (mainland Australia)

Bustard, H.R. (1976). Turtles of coral reefs and coral islands. In Jones, O.A. and Eidean, R. (editors), *Biology and geology of coral reefs*. New York: Academic Press.

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Related reading

World Conference on Sea Turtle Conservation. (1980). Sea turtle conservation strategy: abridged version. *SPC Fisheries Newsletter* 21: 8-15. Noumea: South Pacific Commission.