

# Marine Turtle Newsletter

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**Project TAMAR biologists record data and release adult hawksbill turtle, in conjunction with fishermen at Praia do Forte, Brazil (Marcovaldi *et al.* pages 5-7).**

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## Baby Girls, Old Cattle and Sea Turtles

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Turtles, and especially sea turtles, have long had a unique place in Chinese culture. In coastal states, people make rice cakes in the shape of sea turtles for displays in temples, and prayers for longevity and good prospects are addressed to these turtles during annual festivals (Cheng & Lin 1995). Although it is true that many turtles are caught in fishing nets and are either slaughtered by fishermen or drowned, a significant portion of this turtle bycatch is, in fact, released after being used in religious ceremonies (Cheng & Chen 1997). Some fishermen even think of sea turtles as their “guardian angels”, a belief which is based on legends in which their ancestors were saved by sea turtles during ocean voyages.

Wan-An Island, PengHu Archipelago, is a major nesting site of the green turtle in Taiwan, and the beaches there have been designated as a sanctuary for nesting turtles since December 1995 (Cheng 1995). In April 1996, a buried basalt tablet, (28 cm in length, 62 cm in width and 11 cm thick) was discovered on the island during trench digging. The tablet was made 116 years ago during the late Chin Dynasty, and originally stood by the side of a main public thoroughfare on the island. Under the heading; “Let men of goodwill band together” (“How-Shan-Tuan” in Chinese), it tells in about 600 words how 18 wealthy philanthropists worked together to protect baby girls, old cattle and sea turtles.

The story carved on the tablet is a curious one. Living conditions on the island have always been difficult, and it seems the residents fell into the habit of abandoning their unwanted female babies, as well as cattle (water buffalo) that had grown too old. Families eking out an existence considered both of these to be useless burdens because they could not be put to work in the fields. Meanwhile, sea turtles were slaughtered wantonly because they were so easy to catch in the sea and on the nesting beaches. All of these activities were illegal, but continued until the 18 “men of goodwill” acted decisively to stop them. Some of these philanthropists came from as far away as the coastal states of mainland China, and still others lived

on nearby islands or on Wan-An itself.

With the help of district officials, the philanthropists pooled a portion of their wealth and established a charitable foundation. The interest from this fund was used to subsidise families willing to keep their baby girls and look after their retired cattle. It was also used to ransom captured turtles, which were then set free. In the case of the turtles, the amount paid was based on body weight and size, with more money being paid per unit weight for smaller specimens. A baby girl, on the other hand, attracted a smaller subsidy than an old water buffalo.

As well as providing monetary incentives, and to help ensure that the incentives functioned as intended, the philanthropic group worked to clarify and reinforce the laws that protected baby girls, elderly cows and sea turtles. To this end, they prevailed upon the local government to pass several regional ordinances. These new laws and the history behind them were then carved onto the basalt tablet.

The discovery of the tablet clearly demonstrates that the idea of sea turtle conservation was already established more than one hundred years ago on this island. In fact, compassion for living beings, especially long-lived animals such as turtles, is a fundamental tenet of both Confucianism and Buddhism and has been taught to all levels of Chinese society for thousands of years.

In the 19th century, however, as the power of the Emperor began to weaken and standards of living began to fall, such virtuous teachings were often ignored. Wildlife protection was not given high priority on any political agenda and it is probably only thanks to the spirit and generosity of the 18 private citizens commemorated on this tablet that so many turtles still return, year after year, to the nesting beaches on Wan-An Island.

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