

Chapte 13

Les d'Entrecasteaux Enfin!

Report of an Expedition to Study the Sea Turtles of the d'Entrecasteaux Reefs,
north of New Caledonia

The name La Perouse crops up in odd places—a suburb south of Sydney; the main graveyard in Port-of-Spain; a village in central Manitoba; the scientific name of a Micronesian megapode, but beyond these eclectic memorials, the name of Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de La Perouse, is little remembered today. But this was far from the situation over two centuries ago, when the search for the vanished La Perouse caught the public imagination in a way comparable only to that of Dr. Livingston 80 years later.

La Perouse, the living embodiment of French Exploratory zeal, style, and aristocratic elan, had set out for the western Pacific on a voyage of exploration and empire-building, as France's response to Captain Cook's triumphant discovery of New Holland (now known as Australia) a few year earlier. His fleet included two ships, the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole*, and he was known to have reached Botany Bay (where Sydney now stands, from which he departed on March 10, 1788. These were the days before FAX, and no further word was anticipated until La Perouse's expected arrival in late 1788 on the far side of the Indian Ocean, in Mauritius. He did not arrive. Nor did he show up back home in France in 1789, as his planned itinerary projected.

By 1791, the challenge to find La Perouse was taken up by another French aristocrat, Antoine-Raymond-Joseph de Bruni, Chevalier d'Entrecasteaux, who re-conditioned two ancient, creaky cargo ships, the *Truite* and the *Durance*, renaming them both generically (and euphemistically) as "Frigates," and specifically *La Recherche* and *L'Esperance*, i.e., "Search" and "Hope," names richly symbolic of the task at hand. On September 30, 1791, the little fleet set out with great hopes. As an indication of the public obsession in France with the mission to find La Perouse, it was recorded that even on the very morning of his execution, Louis XVI had asked about the status of the search.

They reached the western Pacific early in 1792, and discovered much. Sailing north-east from Van Diemen's Land, they reached the island rich in *Araucaria* trees—Norfolk Island Pines—south of New Caledonia, that had been named Isle of Pines by Captain Cook when he passed close by in 1774, but whose name was rendered in d'Entrecasteaux' log with the more Freudian spelling "Isle of Penes," perhaps in augury of the *Club Naturiste* that exists there today.

The fleet sailed up the west coast of New Caledonia, up to the islands of New Guinea, back through the Solomons, down to New Caledonia again, and then east to Tonga and New Zealand, discovering and naming islands after themselves all the way. In eastern New Guinea, the large islands now called Normandy, Ferguson, and Goodenough were

the Isles of d'Entrecasteaux; the enormous reef system north of New Caledonia was named Recifs d'Entrecasteaux, and the four small islands in this reef (except for the first, called Isle Surprise because it was unexpected) were named the Huon Islands, after Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec, captain of the "La Recherche." (Today, only the northernmost island bears the name Huon, the others having been renamed Fabre and Le Leixour.) Rossel Island, the terminal member of the chain east of New Guinea, was named after Lieutenant Elizabeth de Rossel, and the nearby Trobriands were named after Jean Francois de Trobriand. The northernmost and smallest of the Loyalty Islands was named after Beautemps-Beaupré, and only the expedition's abrupt change of course to a due easterly one prevented the expedition discovering the main Loyalty islands of Maré, Lifou, and Ouva.

Shortly thereafter, the expedition sailed into chaos and disaster. Huon de Kermadec died at Balade, New Caledonia, in May 1793, and d'Entrecasteaux himself died at sea on July 20th of the same year. The expedition then fell into the hands of the fanatical young Royalist d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau, who, noting that the French Revolution had thrust the fatherland into what he considered alien hands, turned the expedition over to the protection of the Dutch in Java. The upshot was that France lost both ships, and in the course of a long and unhealthy stay in the Dutch East Indies it lost half the expedition's men too, neither able-bodied seamen nor officers, nor artists, nor scientists being spared the onslaught of fatal disease.

And La Perouse was not found. It was not until 1826 that the Irish Captain Dillon noticed a scabbard bearing La Perouse's crest in the hands of a native in the Solomon Islands, and two years more were to pass before Dumont d'Urville found submerged remains of the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* near the island of Vanikoro.

The next event of note was the accidental 1854 visit of the American William Billings, master of the junk *Ningpo*, to the d'Entrecasteaux Reef. Billings, on a cargo journey from Hong Kong to Australia, found himself, victim of storms and erratic winds, shipwrecked on a reef about six miles east of Iles Leleixour and Fabre. Plans were proposed to raft to the Isle of Pines, but the crew refused, terrified by tales of cannibalism amongst the natives of both the mainland of New Caledonia and the Isle of Pines itself. Billings was forced to hunker down until rescue came. And it was sea turtles that saved him during those arduous months.

Billings wrote:

Every preparation was now made for a long sojourn on the island by keeping a vigilant look-out for turtle, which now began to come on to shore in great numbers. Two large pens were built, and upwards of eighty, weighing on an average 5 cwt, were put into them.

The pens being full, they commenced drying the flesh of others to provide against the time they would desert these shores; which they do during the months of November and December after depositing their eggs, and return as early as July, increasing daily from this period. They were so numerous in September that the Master turned twenty-seven one morning without wetting his feet, and he counted eighteen more asleep in about six inches water, which could have been captured without difficulty.

That Billings survived to publish his observations, which appeared in the Nautical Magazine and Nautical Chronicle in March 1856, was the result of a courageous expedition by his chief mate and a passenger, the pair incongruously named Mr. Tough and Mr.

Dainty respectively, who improvised a sailing raft and managed to reach the coast of Australia. There they were severely beaten and stripped naked by aboriginals, but after several weeks they managed to crawl into Moreton Bay and ultimately reached Sydney, where the Colonial Government immediately dispatched a rescue ship, HMS *Torch*. The *Torch* reached Billings on October 26, 1854.

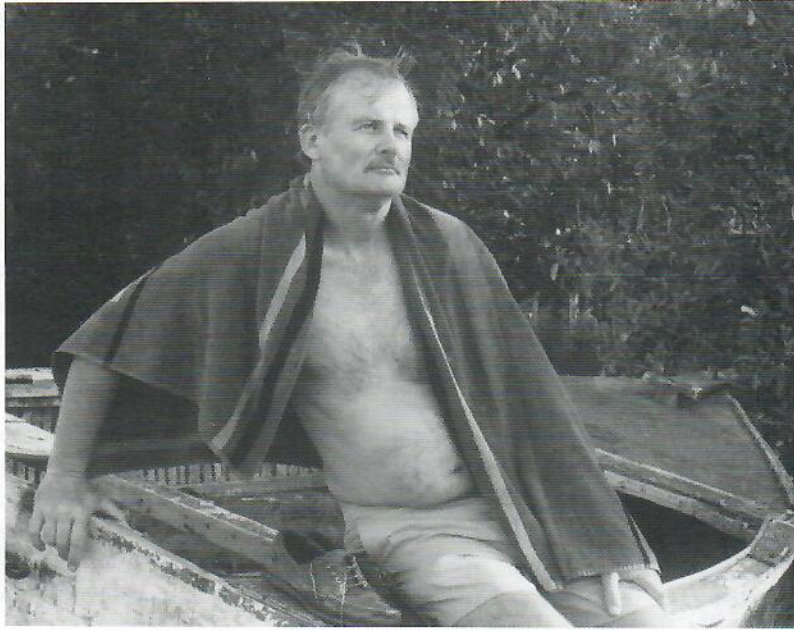
The intriguing allusion to great numbers of turtles was not followed up. Early in the 20th century there was extensive guano mining in the islands of the d'Entrecasteaux Reef by an Australian company named Austral Guano, but the written record of these operations is scant, although the profile of Ile Surprise shows major scars of guano mining to this day. In researching his 1962 book, *The Green Turtle and Man*, James Parsons found the Billings account, in Lt. Chimmo's 1856 paper, but summarized it in only a few lines, with the closing comment: "One wonders if they still haul up there today, and in what numbers."

Half-remembering this comment, and noticing the name "D'Entrecasteaux Islands" on a map while I was undertaking a sea turtle survey in Papua New Guinea in 1976, I committed significant resources both to aerial survey of the coasts of all three of these islands, and to extensive interviews with local inhabitants, but found little evidence of turtles in any numbers. It was only upon my return to Florida that I became aware of my having confused the d'Entrecasteaux Islands (politically part of Papua New Guinea) with the reefs of the same name that are part of New Caledonia.

In 1979, while attending a sea turtle conference at the South Pacific Commission in New Caledonia, George Balazs invited me to participate in an aerial survey of the entire New Caledonia coast, including the d'Entrecasteaux Islands, that was jointly funded by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the South Pacific Commission. We found only occasional tracks on the mainland beaches, but the islands, 125 years after Billings made his observations, showed evidence of major nesting—abundant on the southern island of Surprise, and reaching saturation level on the other three. It was most exciting. We also saw numerous tracks on the beach on Beautemps-Beaupré, although this island was not in the same league as the d'Entrecasteaux reef islands, either geographically or turtle-wise.

Follow-up proved difficult, but after years of trying to mount an expedition, I undertook another aerial survey in February 1987. We failed to find any of the islands. My fear of emulating Earhart (Amelia, not Lew) increased as the pilot, clearly not having a clue where he was, ignored both my advice and the recommendations of a Melanesian tribal chief whom I had invited as a sort of backup navigator with appropriate genetic imprinting and good instincts for negotiating these waters. We flew up, down, and around over the trackless Pacific for several hours without finding anything—not even an atoll reef line that could have guided us to an island. The experience was terrifying. I was keenly aware that, having started from the island of Belep, and the Grand Terre of New Caledonia itself being an island, we might be flying over the trackless waters of the largest ocean of all until fuel ran out. But the pilot finally located the navigation transponder on Belep, and we made it back. I was offered no refund for the inability of the pilot to locate any of the islands of interest, although the company offered me a free trip to the Loyalty Islands the next day.

Finally, however, we made it to the islands. In late 1991, with sponsorship from the Chelonia Institute and in partnership with the New Caledonia Nature Protection Society, I celebrated the 200th anniversary of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition by chartering a ship out of Nouméa and visiting each of the four islands, in company with a team of young and enthusiastic French volunteers (who wore nothing but wispy silk loincloths



PCHP on Ile Pott

for the whole trip), a Melanesian chief, my wife Sibille, and a captain who knew how to navigate, even though we did not carry GPS, a technology still in its infancy.

On the way north, we again visited the island of Belep, the last inhabited island and one where the French are still reluctant to go, the natives never having forgiven the colonists for having forcibly evacuated their forebears for six years in 1892 in order to establish a leper colony. However, we were able to visit the island for a few hours, making it clear that I, for one, was not French; that we were celebrating d'Entrecasteaux' bicentenary rather than the leprosarium's centenary; and that we wanted to interview them about their annual turtle-hunting trips to Ile Surprise. We tied up alongside the dock, and before long strange-looking children started to arrive and stare at us, who must have looked equally strange to them.

Actually, it is politically incorrect to call them strange-looking, and they were quite friendly although very snot-nosed; it's simply that if one has not been in Melanesia before, the combination of black faces and wavy, blond hair was very unfamiliar. A little later the young women started to arrive, all wearing long skirts, and we made them welcome on board with my wife's fashion magazines and with music from the record player, to which they started to dance with abandon. Some of them had pet frigate birds and red-footed boobies, that had been collected on the d'Entrecasteaux Islands on hunting and fishing trips. They had all brought their supplies of marijuana, but it was still fresh and green, and Pollux the captain had to show them how to microwave it so that it would burn better. At one point Sibille happened to mention that she had personally known Bob Marley years ago, at which point this enigmatic group of Melanesian Rastafarians, living as far as could be imagined from either Jamaica or Ethiopia and without a drop of African blood in their veins, became wildly excited and treated Sibille as if she were a sort of deity, who might transmit blessings if they touched her hand. But they were disappointed that she had never got stoned with Marley.

Then the excited cries suddenly changed to shrieks of fear. A powerful-looking Melanesian man of about forty, with heavy musculature and a thick black beard, was standing on the dock, and he was not looking pleased. The terrified, somewhat overdressed young women immediately jumped into deep water on the open-sea side of the boat, and floundered ashore as best they could. We did not stay long enough to learn how to interpret this development, but instead we set sail and found a sheltered cove, where we spent the night, on an uninhabited neighboring island, called (I speak the truth!) Ile Pott.

The reef islands turned out to have spectacular concentrations of sea birds, including frigates, red-tailed tropic birds, mutton birds, and boobies of three species. As I had earlier seen in the Galápagos and Aldabra, the red-footed boobies always perched in trees and bushes, even on islands where there was extremely little vegetation of any kind. There were also spectacular numbers of turtles—all greens, *Chelonia mydas*. We counted 310 tracks on Ile Surprise, but only tagged 14 turtles there. On Huon, however, on December 11, we counted 1800 tracks, and tagged 149 turtles that night before the tags ran out, and found one nesting turtle that had been tagged on Wistari Reef, Queensland in 1985. We saw 572 tracks on Ile Fabre, 130 tracks and 80 nests on one small unnamed sandy cay nearby, and 150 tracks on another cay. A single night on Fabre and another night on Leleixour resulted in the tagging of 54 turtles in each case. The modal over-curve carapace length of all turtles was 105 cm, and the largest 122 cm.

Conditions were so dry that the turtles had difficulty nesting. The sand tended to flow back into the incomplete nest cavity, and we saw a great many aborted nesting attempts, with the turtle returning later that night (or the following night) for another attempt. On Ile Leleixour, many turtles were temporarily trapped by low tide after nesting, walking or resting in a long channel in the reef rock that paralleled the beach. But this groove contained enough water to prevent the turtles' overheating in the sun, and they were able to escape as the tide rose. On the other hand, several dead turtles were found on Isle Huon, some with no evidence of having been caught in obstructions. Perhaps not all died while nesting, in that one of the dead turtles was smaller than any nesting female we measured, and these islands were documented by Billings as having significant numbers of turtles basking near the water's edge in the daytime. René Grandperrin of ORSTOM de Nouméa advises me that this still occurs on the long south beach of Huon.

Shoki, our Melanesian chief, was able to collect the dark red, plume-like tail feathers from several of the tropic birds, for traditional rituals known only to him, and with unknown impact upon either the aerial ability or courtship success of these beautiful birds. And although he had no objection to us collecting the skulls of the green turtle carcasses that lay here and there on the islands, he performed elaborate rituals over them before we could pack them up as specimens and take them away. We grew very fond of Shoki as the trip progressed, and realized that he was the living embodiment of a great deal of disappearing culture and tradition, although we got a somewhat negative first impression because he appeared to be quite drunk when he first came on board. Later we learned that he was subject to extreme seasickness, and this was his way of reducing its effects. After the first few hours, we never saw him drunk again.

I should also mention that, because this was a French boat with a French crew, the victuals were not merely good, they were *cordon bleu*, superb. Moreover, stored in the cabinets under our seats around the dining table was an extraordinary selection and impressive quantity of fine French wines. After a few days, we learned that the dining steward and chef had been recruited, just for this voyage, from one of the finest restau-

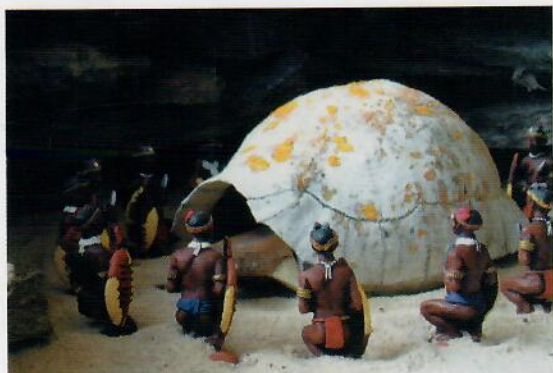


Three chiefs on the d'Entrecasteaux expedition, Sibille Pritchard; Captain Pollux; and Chief Shoki

rants in Nouméa. The wine never faltered, but drinking water did, and so did fuel. Finally, on our homeward journey, both of these latter vital commodities expired with the northern tip of the mainland of New Caledonia just visible in the distance. We laid out almost all of the anchor line, and finally hit bottom, whereupon we stood around in the unaccustomed silence and pondered our options.

All available empty plastic tanks were mustered, and the last couple of gallons of fuel were used to power the small dinghy with its 15 hp engine to the distant shoreline. Watching this tiny boat with two of our crew putt-putting away to the south, I thought of Mr. Tough and Mr. Dainty, nearly 200 years earlier, on their epic and far longer journey from the same area to bring help to the marooned cheloniophage William Billings. It turned out that there was a village, called Poum, with a gas station, almost at the northernmost tip of the main island, and a sufficiency of combustible was obtained to enable the ship itself to complete its journey and tank up properly before sailing the final 300 kilometers to Nouméa.

ABOUT THE BOOK

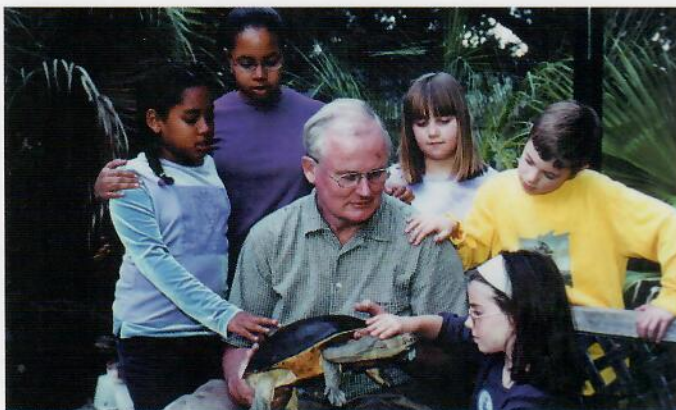


TALES FROM THE THÉBAÏDE: Reflections of a Turtleman is a volume of scientific essays, personal adventures, autobiographical vignettes, and philosophical musings. It includes accounts of travel to many lands where Pritchard sought insight into the shelled reptiles. Several in-depth obituaries, including that of Florida's Archie Carr, are presented. Looking for tortoises in the Galápagos Islands makes up a major section, and there is a scholarly discourse on the taxonomic status of sea turtles. There is a long section on why he set up his personal "Thébaïde," the Chelonian Research Institute,

and he thoroughly enjoys the zany, sometimes unbelievable players of the past who launched their own Cabinet of Curiosities. Pritchard's reflections encompass his love of life and his hope that his readers will share his delight in people, science, culture, conservation, argument, scholarship, and (of course) turtles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter C.H. Pritchard, M.A., Ph.D. is best known as an authority on the biology and conservation of turtles and tortoises. Both before and after receiving his doctorate in 1969, he has undertaken extensive field work with turtles in all continents. He has established a permanent field station for turtle conservation in northwestern Guyana. Since 1998 he has been director of the Chelonian Research Institute in Oviedo, Florida, and is an adjunct professor of biology at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Central Florida. Dr. Pritchard has been recognized as a "Champion in the Wild" by the Discovery television channel, and a "Hero of the Planet" by *Time Magazine*. In 2001, he was declared "Floridian of the Year" by the *Orlando Sentinel* newspaper.



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