

# Gumpses

of Micronesia & the Western Pacific



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*Age-old traditions, such as the edict of this ornately tattooed island chief, protect the Pacific green turtle.*



# TURTLES

## and tradition

By Louise B. Matthews

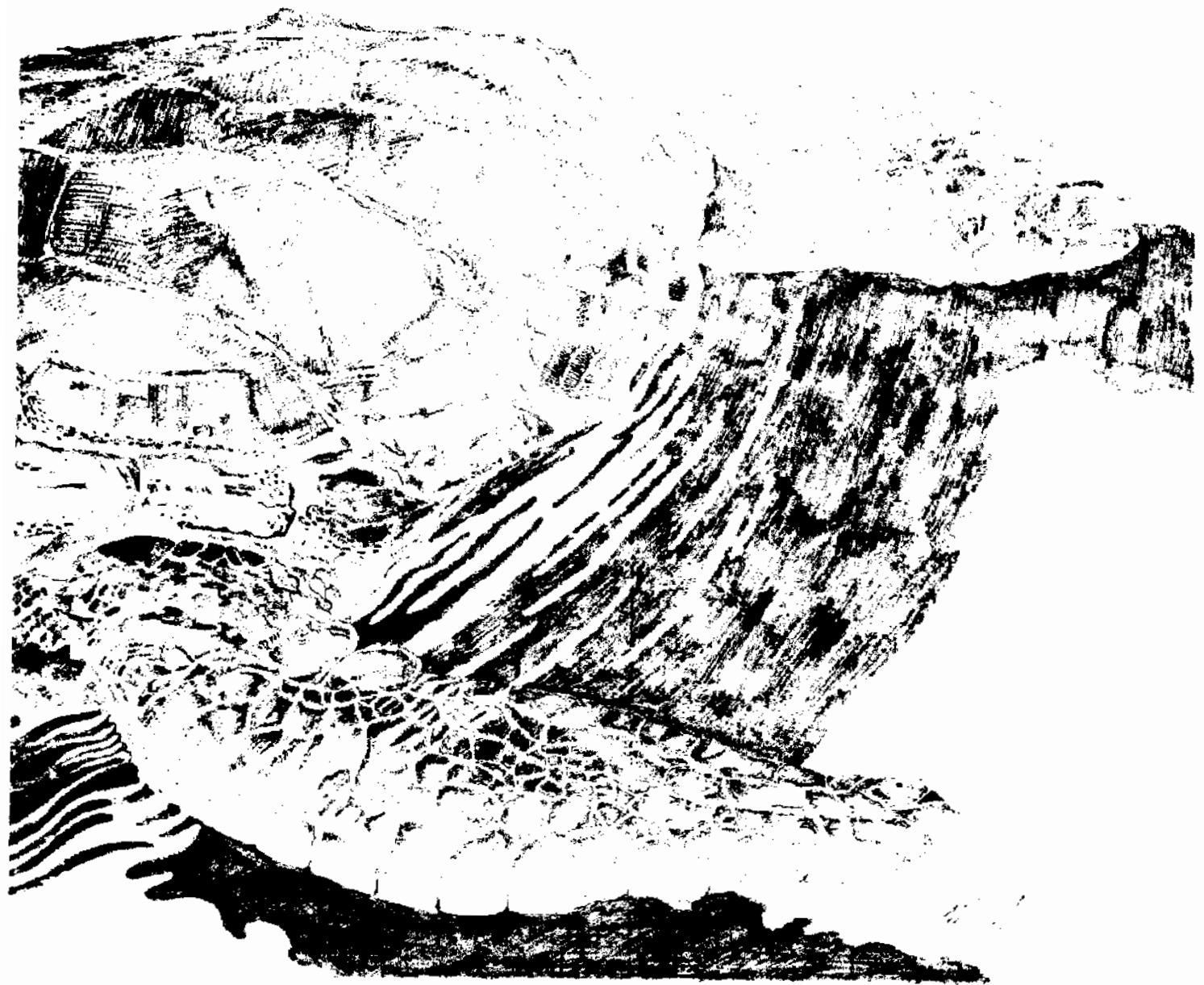
If a bombshell had burst on the tiny island in Ulithi Atoll, (one of the outer areas of Yap in Micronesia) it would not have produced greater shock.

The ornately tattooed chief called the islanders together and issued a stringent command regarding use of the seas. For a period of three weeks no one, with ab-

solutely no exceptions, could touch or use the waters of the ocean. To the people of these Western Caroline Islands, whose lives are dependent on the seas, this severe edict was calamitous. It meant no fishing (when their main source of food was the lagoon), no swimming, no washing, no cooking with seawater, no

traveling, and even no using the ocean as the ordinary sanitary facility.

The reason for this harsh, mass punishment was the discovery of the shell and bones of a green turtle that someone had killed and eaten. This ignoble act had taken place on the chief's island and without his permission. Only a few



generations ago a person guilty of this crime would have been speedily put to death. As the culprit would not come forward, everyone must be punished. This included a few U.S. government employees, Peace Corps workers, and a Jesuit priest who happened to be on the island. Other government officials were warned by radio to stay away for the duration lest they also be interned.

In addition to making the ocean off-limits, the island people were commanded to make 60 lava-lavas, the long hand-woven strips worn as skirts by the women and often used as money within the culture. Lava-lavas are usually made in beautiful and intricate designs from

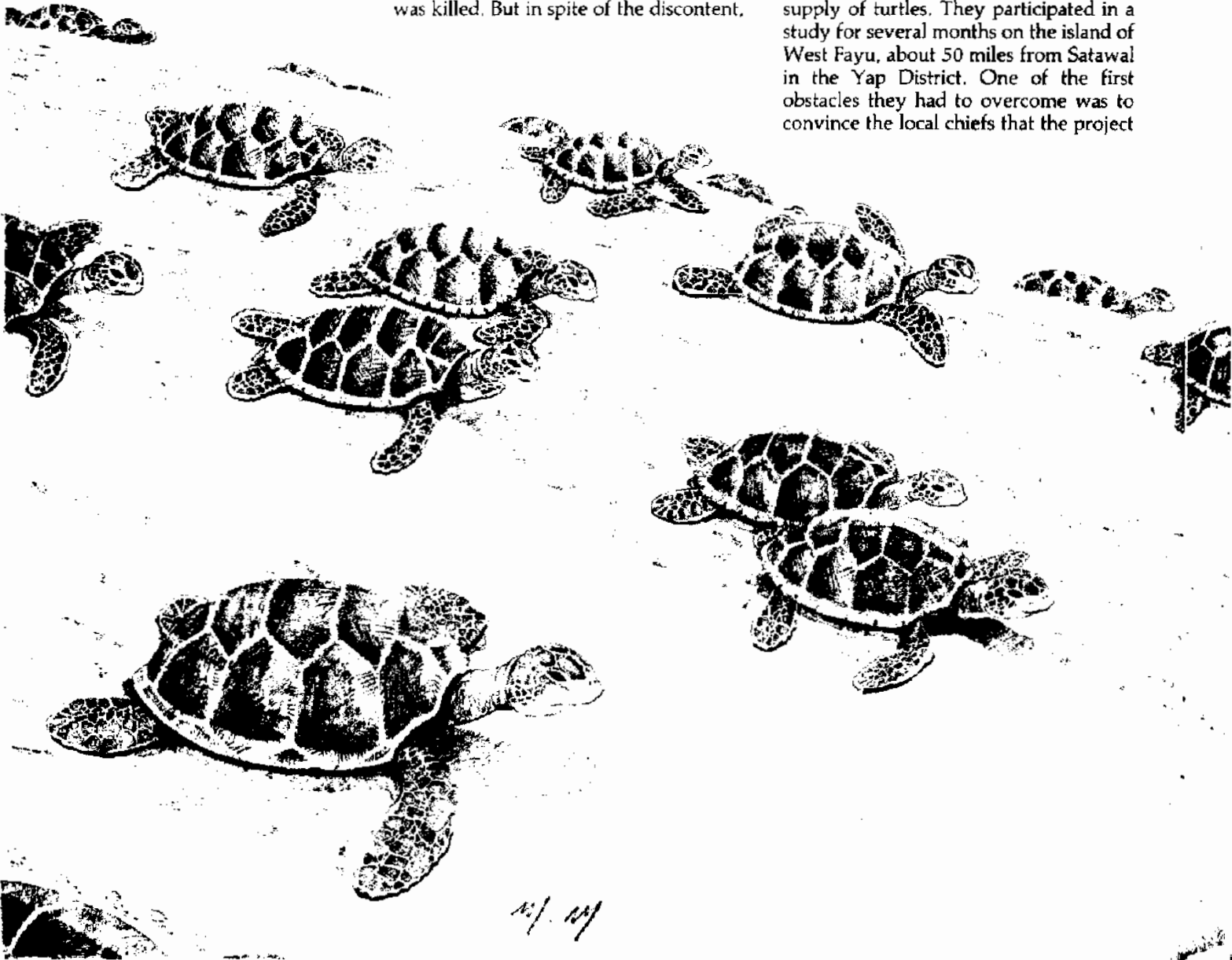
the fibers of native hibiscus, pandanus, and other vegetation. The terms of the punishment left no doubt in the minds of anyone what the alternative would be—destruction of crops and houses!

At the end of the specified time, the elders humbly presented themselves to the chief bearing the required number of lava-lavas, including four very beautiful ones especially designed for royalty. The chief graciously accepted the garments and abject apologies, and restoration of ocean privileges was granted.

However the harsh experience of the punishment precipitated subdued resentment from a few of the natives. Some of the youths who had journeyed to Ulithi's Outer Islands High School had become aware of a more democratic lifestyle. They began questioning why they, too, should not share in eating turtle as they did tuna or octopus when one was killed. But in spite of the discontent,

they grudgingly recognized the age-old tradition that only royalty could kill the green turtle, a practice instituted for a very pragmatic purpose. The chief, by arbitrary decree, expressed the ingrained awareness of Micronesians for preservation of and respect for their environment.

Following this confrontation, there have been recent developments within the culture which may effect a compromise and allow occasional feasting on the coveted turtle meat on a limited basis by all the people. Encouraging reports on the situation in these islands have been made by the Yap Institute of the Western Carolines and the Marine Resource Center. A graduate student from the University of Guam, assisted by several natives from the island of Satawal, engineered a project which should greatly replenish the dwindling supply of turtles. They participated in a study for several months on the island of West Fayu, about 50 miles from Satawal in the Yap District. One of the first obstacles they had to overcome was to convince the local chiefs that the project



would safeguard the turtles. Since the royal command concerning them also extended to restrictions on the island favored by the female turtles for laying eggs, concessions had to be made. These areas are so jealously guarded no one is allowed to stay there lest the creatures be driven away. Only on specified days during the year is anyone allowed to even visit the islands, and then only a certain number of eggs may be taken for food. When permission was finally granted, the volunteer workers took shifts and kept constant watch from posts in high coconut palms for the females to make nests and lay eggs.

The workers then constructed pens of wire mesh over and around the nests in the sand to protect them from predators such as birds and crabs. After the eggs hatched, they fed the baby turtles for a month until they attained a size large enough to have better chance for survival in the open ocean. The guardians watched protectingly as they were released and scurried toward the waters.

Although the time spent on the island after emerging from the egg is not more than a minute or two, the female turtle usually returns to the same deserted white beach sands year after year. To lay her eggs she goes ashore, digs a hole with her hind feet and deposits them.

She then covers the hole, carefully camouflaging the nest so enemies cannot find the eggs, and ponderously retraces her path to the sea. Her work is done, and she has no further contact with her offspring. Many other creatures, including men, greedily desire the eggs. And the chance of the newly hatched turtle, not more than three inches in size, successfully running the gauntlet to the sea without being devoured is about one in a hundred.

Another important phase of the project instituted by student workers involved tagging turtles in order to study migration patterns, nesting, and breeding habits. The adult turtles are flipped over on their backs and while helpless, metal tags are attached to the front flippers indicating place of tagging, size, and sex. This accurately recorded data is invaluable for study by scientists and environmentalists. To encourage public support of this program, posters were placed all over Micronesia offering the sum of \$5.00 for return of each tag.

In the effort to protect sea turtles, this species will not only be saved from extinction but persistent questions scientists have debated for years may be answered. Why do females return to the same beaches where they were born? Do they actually lay fertile eggs for years after a single mating? What happens to the young turtles when they enter the ocean and swim out to the deep waters? Most students admit they are not seen again until they are two or three years

old. How far do they migrate? Again, some studies claim turtles travel thousands of miles. There is much man still has to learn about turtles.

Inhabitants of the Western Carolines, by adhering to their chief's rule concerning turtles, contribute to protecting this gentle and attractive creature. They know indiscriminate slaughter will spell doom for green turtles. In the same manner natives of all these lovely Pacific islands unconsciously and intuitively adapt to ecological practices to insure their cultural survival through the centuries. With their ancient knowledge and skill, atoll dwellers specially realize they must live with the sea, not against it, and they respect its powers and its sea life. They love the swift and graceful swimmers, and they honor their size and age which often lasts from 100 to 150 years.

Far greater danger of extinction to sea turtles comes from commercial abuse of fishing waters, uncontrolled marine harvests, and modern man's inherent greed. Green turtles (known as "green" because of the color of their fat) are highly prized for food. The demand for green turtle soup has escalated market prices for the frozen meat. Turtle shells are valuable also and used by artisans in making jewelry, tables, and art objects. There is even a ready commerce for their hides, eagerly sought for leather. Pollution also presents a dangerous threat to the delicate biological balance of all oceans.

There is no indication what the future holds for the imperiled green turtle, our valuable gift of the sea. But how tragic it will be if it is not preserved for the interest and enjoyment of future generations!

