

People

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A change of heart

FOR 30 years he dived and captured turtles. He mastered the art of nabbing these ancient creatures and soon became the authority to call when turtle meat was needed for traditional functions or feasts.

Recently Ravulolo Tuikubulau, 52, had a change of heart, so much so that it pained him to even see the slaughter of this meek reptile.

"They just lie there when you kill them - they don't put up a fight," he said.

"They'll just flap around their flippers but you'd barely hear them utter a cry.

"I decided I didn't want to have anything to do with that kind of violence anymore."

The Nakalou villager in Macuata was bred on turtle meat, to love its taste and go hunting for it whenever the craving for it overtook him.

"I'd go out and catch them even if there was no traditional need to do so," he said.

"I regretted that attitude when I finally realized that their numbers had seriously gone down."

A skilled diver, Mr Tuikubulau usually foraged Nabekavu waters, which is the traditional fishing grounds of Nakalou villagers.

The usual methods employed to capture a turtle either included hooking the turtle shell collar, spearing them or sneaking in the dead of night while they were sound asleep.

And then there are specific days to go out diving.

"During high tides when the new moon is in the sky they are really easy to catch then," he said.

"I usually find them sleeping in small caves in the reef."

He reckoned he has probably captured more than 100 turtles over the years - mostly green turtles and the Hawksbill - and not one he released back into the sea.

However, last week when he went out diving it proved to be a different night.

He dived for two nights before he captured a large green, swimming towards him.

"When I saw it swimming towards my boat I dived low and met it halfway, stuck a hook into the collar of its shell and swam back to the boat," he said.

This green was lucky, for Mr Tuikubulau would release it back into the sea.

The green turtle was captured for conservation purposes, to be satellite tagged and released as part of a program undertaken by the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Secretariat of the Regional Environment Program.

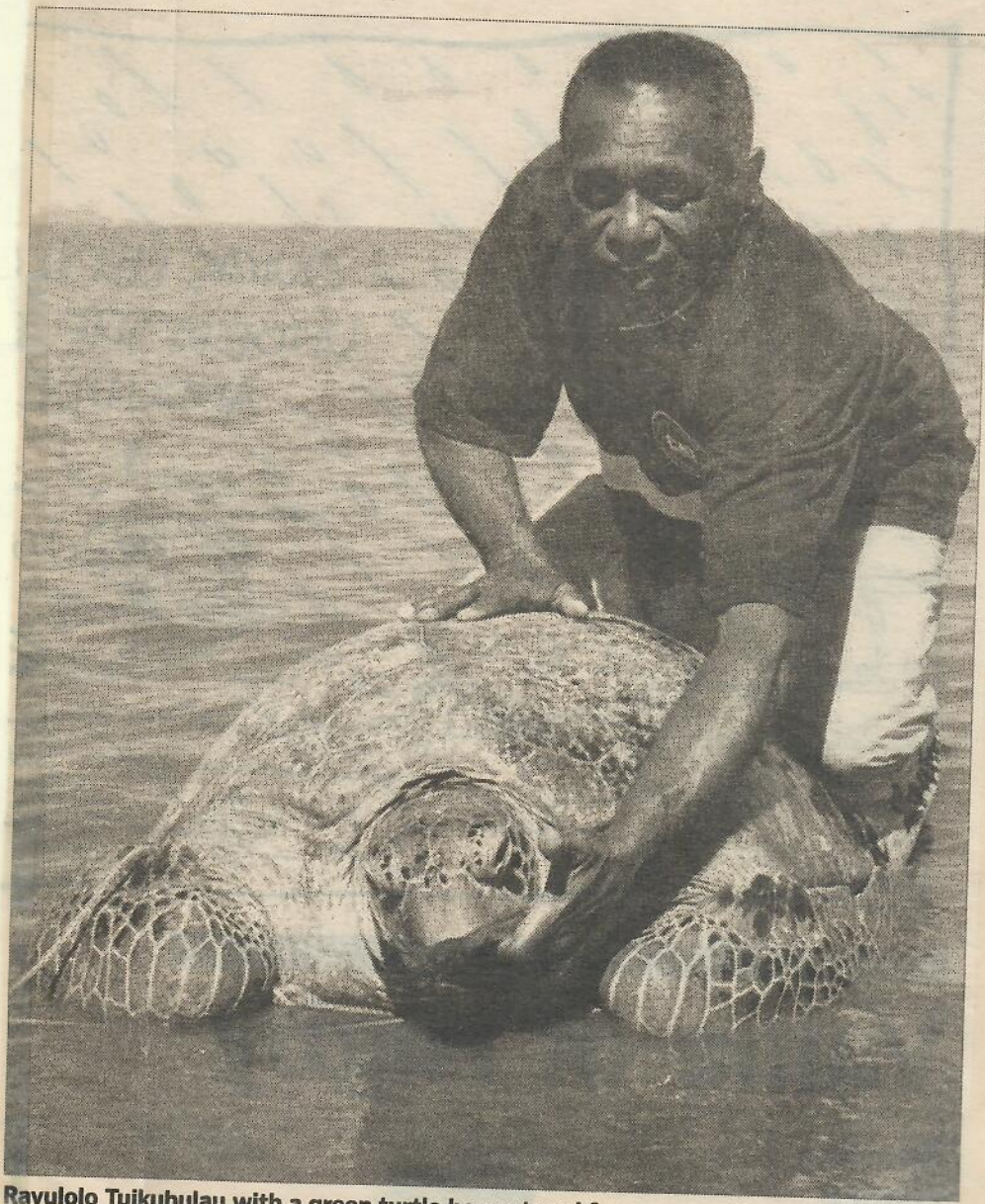
Standing near the sea, for first time in his diving life, Mr Tuikubulau said he was a proud man.

"I'm happy to become a conservationist, no longer a turtle predator but a friend," he said.

"I'm calling on everyone to lose the taste for turtle meat, and stop killing turtles."

7/3/2010

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Ravulolo Tuikubulau with a green turtle he captured for conservation purposes.

Picture: THERESA RALOGAIVAU.