

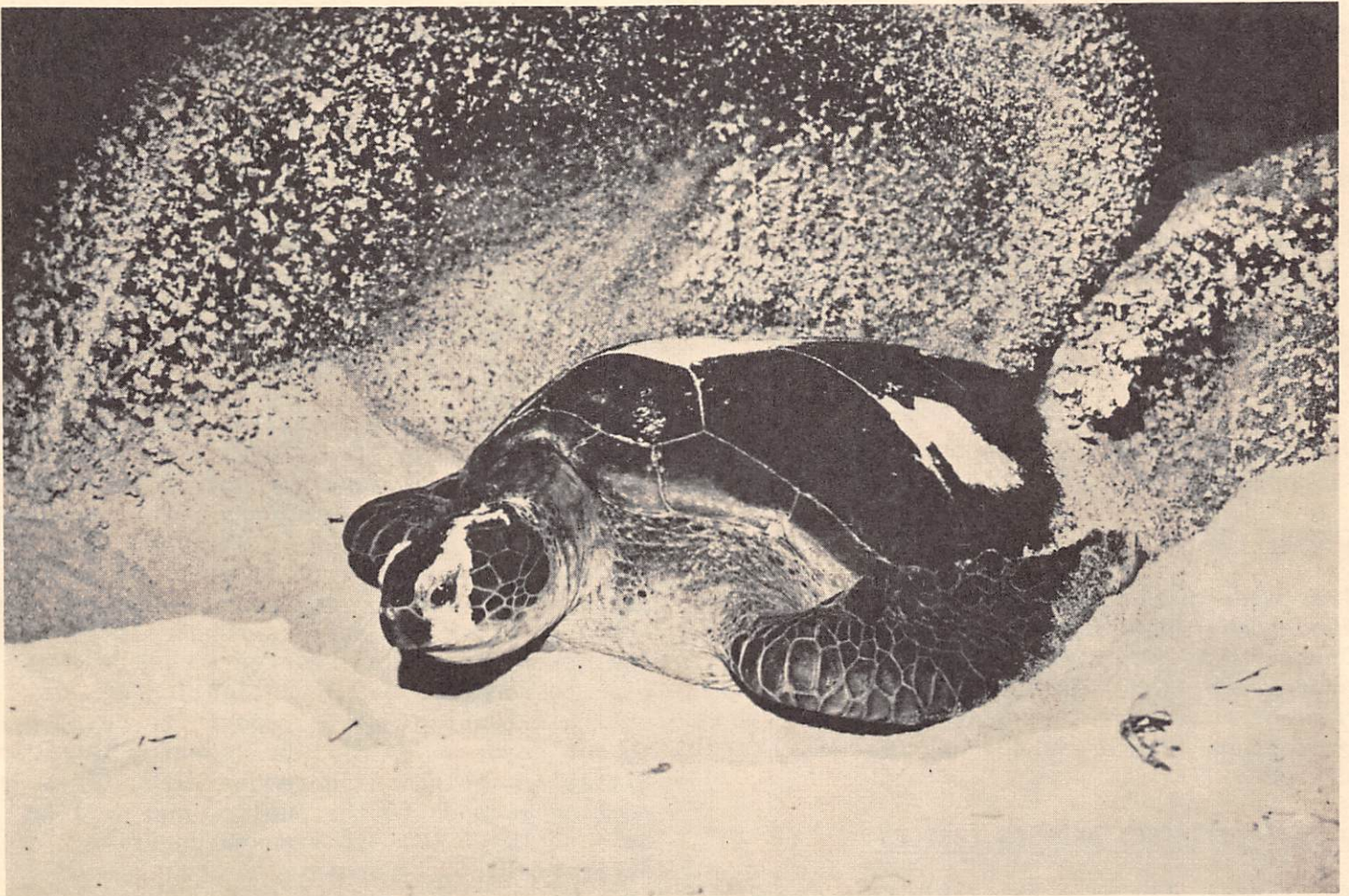
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Nesting *Chelonia mydas* at Isla Aves.

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SPECIAL REPORT: GREEN SEA TURTLE FARMING

The operations of the world's only commercial green sea turtle farm were placed into new hands this past March 9th. The "farm", previously operated by Mariculture Ltd.--- until that firm was placed in receivership last year---has been purchased for \$2,162,000 by a consortium headed by a West German family.

The new company, Cayman Turtle Farm Ltd., is 75% owned by the Mittag family of Dusseldorf, Germany, and 25% by the Commonwealth Development Finance Company Ltd.

The owners intend to invest approximately \$2,000,000 into the farm. In addition, the secured creditors of the defunct Mariculture Ltd. company (Commonwealth Development Finance Company Ltd., First National City Bank, and Guinness Mahon Cayman Trust Ltd.) will lend back to the new owners the money they received from the sale of the farm.

In total, the Cayman Turtle Farm Ltd. should have approximately \$4,300,000 in credit with which to develop their operations and marketing.

According to a report in the Cayman Island *Nor'wester* (April, 1976) the government of Grand Cayman---a small island located in the Caribbean south of Cuba---has obtained 50,000 shares of the new company (at \$1 per share) in lieu of taxes and duties. The Governor of Grand Cayman called the new company's takeover of the old Mariculture Ltd. operations "a significant sign of faith in the Cayman Islands."

The new company's principal owners, headed by Dr. Heintz Mittag, issued a statement on March 9th that the new company intended to develop turtle farming into a successful industry based on the concept that the world's food supplies would ultimately have to be supplemented from the sea's food resources.

They further stated that they believed problems encountered in the farming operation could be overcome.

Clearly, the takeover prevented the collapse of the sea turtle farm. In the summer of

1975 an analysis of the farm showed liabilities of over \$2,700,000. An additional bank loan of \$550,000 had not reversed the downward trend. Robert Moyle, of Price Waterhouse and Company, (the receiver and manager of Mariculture Ltd.) indicated that at the end of 1975 serious consideration was given to slaughtering all the turtles and closing the farm. Dr. Mittag's intervention, according to Mr. Moyle, occurred "at the twelfth hour" to save the farm.

THE VIEWS OF THE CRITICS

While the new company has installed new management for the farm, and embarked on an impressive public relations and sales program, conditions for the captive sea turtles there have not improved. According to Dr. Peter Pritchard, serious overcrowding and disease problems still exist. "The turtles are sometimes three-deep and have to take turns to come up for air," he recently stated.

Dr. Pritchard's remarks seem to be typical of the reaction to the farm by the majority of the world's sea turtle experts. Indeed, the very concept of "farming" green turtles commercially is widely opposed.

Dr. Archie Carr, acknowledged to be the foremost authority in the field, recently stated in a telephone interview with *CHELONIA* that he was adamantly opposed to the Cayman Turtle Farm operation. "I do not believe in trafficking in any endangered species," he said. He added, "the only sort of farming operation I would endorse would be one that can be proven...to *decrease* the worldwide demand for sea turtle products."

Dr. F. Wayne King, noted conservationist with the New York Zoological Society, echoed those sentiments in another telephone interview. "I am absolutely opposed to the Mariculture operation," he emphasized.

The opposition of most turtle experts to the "farming" operations are based on the following points:

1) Skepticism of the farm's claim of eventual self-containment into an operation similar to cattle, sheep, or hog raising. The critics

point out the fact that the farm has and is importing tens of thousands of wild sea turtle eggs---eggs that the farm claims come from "doomed" beaches where they wouldn't hatch anyway. According to Dr. King and others, 80,000 to 90,000 eggs *per year* have been collected from Surinam alone. Dr. King has stated that---in using the farm's own figures---the farm will overstrip their own breeding capabilities in 3 or 4 years.

2) The overcrowding and disease conditions already mentioned. Dr. Pritchard, who visited the farm as part of an IUCN task force, and who has continued to receive reports from other visitors, states that the conditions under which the animals must live are inhumane and cruel.

3) The wasteful expenditures of protein and energy to "grow" an animal that in the wild lives by grazing on underwater vegetation. Bernard Nietschmann [see "Green Sea Turtles and the Protein Connection". *CHELONIA* 2(3): 9-14.] has reported that the amount of imported high-protein food that must be fed to captive turtles is way out of proportion to the amount of protein recovered when the turtles are processed for human consumption. Even Dr. Walter Johnson, chief executive of the new Cayman Turtle Farm company has admitted that about \$750,000 *per year* has been spent on food for the turtles, as well as \$250,000 for its transportation to Grand Cayman. Thus, a total of \$1,000,000 per year for food has been spent---not including the immense cost of transporting diesel fuel to the Island to run the pumps and other machinery necessary to keep the farm operating.

4) The creation of markets for an endangered species where such markets have not previously existed. The recent promotion of sea turtle meat by a California restaurant chain is a prime example. California has prohibited for several years sea turtle products---with the recent exception of Mariculture/Cayman Turtle Farm products. (Just how this exception was created will be discussed later on in this report.) Critics point out that a non-discriminating public will be encouraged to turn to wild sea turtles if and when the commercial farm should cease operations. An acquired taste, they point out, is not easily discouraged.

Further, the popularity of sea turtle pro-

ducts can and has had a spurring effect on the hunting of wild turtles. Dr. Pritchard points out that 4 private boats now operate from Grand Cayman to take (illegally) sea turtles from the waters off Nicaragua. These turtles are then sold on Grand Cayman at a price of \$200 to \$300 each. The reason for this, says Dr. Pritchard, is that sea turtle "gourmets" prefer the taste of wild turtle to the (in their opinion) rather bland taste of the commercial product.

5) The lack of adequate conservation policies on the part of the "farm". Over the past several years the operators of the turtle farm have claimed to release into the wild approximately 1% of the turtles hatched out there. Whether this number has offset the drain on wild populations through egg collecting is greatly doubted by most observers. In fact, the IUCN task force that investigated the Mariculture Ltd. operations two years ago concluded that the farm was *not in the best interests of the conservation of the green sea turtle in the Caribbean*. [see "Mariculture: Pro and Con". *CHELONIA* 2(2): 13-18.]

THE CALIFORNIA SITUATION

In the summer of 1974 Mariculture Ltd., represented by stockholder Dr. Samuel Ayres, a Los Angeles physician, and aided by Jack Gilcrist, a lobbyist for the Seafood Institute, persuaded California Assemblyman Jim Keysor to introduce a bill granting Mariculture an exemption to the prohibition on sea turtle product importations.

The ensuing battle in Sacramento was fought by Virginia Handley---a dedicated conservationist and strong advocate of animal welfare---and R.M. Christensen. The Sierra Club, originally opposed to the Mariculture bill, changed its mind very quickly and decided to drop its opposition. John Zierold, chief lobbyist for the Club, explained the turnabout by claiming that the Sierra Club did not wish to offend Assemblyman Keysor, as they wanted his vote on another bill which they thought was *more important*.

After a long and sometimes bitter conflict, the pro-Mariculture forces agreed to amend the bill with provisions calling for the IUCN to approve the farm's operations as a condition for allowing the California Depart-

ment of Fish & Game to issue a permit to the farm for the importation of its products. The amended bill was quickly passed by both legislative houses and sent to Governor Ronald Reagan, who signed it in September 1974.

At a meeting of the Fish & Game Commission in Oxnard, California in March 1975, the necessary regulations were approved to establish a permit system for allowing farmed turtle products into the state. Opposition to this permit system was led by Ms. Handley, and included *CHELONIA*, the California Turtle & Tortoise Club, the San Diego Turtle & Tortoise Society, the Bay Area Turtle & Tortoise Society, and individuals such as Dr. F. Wayne King---all to no avail.

At approximately this time the Mariculture Ltd. company went into receivership. Thus, it appeared to most critics that the controversy had been finally laid to rest with the apparently imminent demise of the farm.

What actually followed, though, presents a most astonishing and revealing picture of the power of moneyed interests and cooperative government agencies.

LOBBYING BY THE FISH & GAME DEPARTMENT

The very cooperative and flatly pro-turtle farm agency referred to was none other than the California Department of Fish & Game, headed by Director E. Charles Fullerton. Mr. Fullerton's opinions on the Mariculture Ltd. operations were clearly expressed in a letter sent to the National Marine Fisheries Service (Dept. of Commerce) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Dept. of Interior) on July 7, 1975---*two months before California importation permits were issued.*

"My staff has reviewed the proposed rule making that would determine the green sea turtle, the loggerhead sea turtle, and the Pacific ridley sea turtle to be threatened species. (Ed. note: See "Federal Protection for Sea Turtles?" *CHELONIA* 3(1): 7, for summary of proposed Federal regulations) California has also recognized the precarious existence of the sea turtles, and as a result banned the importation of turtle products into the State three years ago.

"In the interim, work done by Mariculture Ltd. on Grand Cayman Island in cooperation with the governments of Surinam, Costa Rica, and Ascension Island has done much to develop propagation methods that can be used to enhance the declining world sea turtle population.

"Your proposed rule making will allow two years for completion of a program to develop a self-sustaining turtle mariculture stock. What the proposed rule making fails to do is provide an avenue for the continued propagation of turtles reared from doomed eggs or eggs laid on beaches where there is no chance of survival. If the world marine turtle populations are in trouble, then a positive program for their assistance is needed. We do not feel that simply banning turtle products from import into this country is a positive approach. If the purpose of this rule making is to truly protect and enhance the world sea turtle populations, there should be some incentive to encourage the hatching, rearing, and releasing of young turtles from nests that would otherwise be lost. Programs of this type cost money and *unless a percentage of these turtles can be reared and sold commercially* to offset costs of propagation, then the work would have to be subsidized by the sometimes poor countries that are affected most.

"We believe the laws and regulations developed in California will materially aid in encouraging rehabilitation of the world's marine turtle populations while realistically allowing some legitimate use of the resource. We have enclosed copies of our laws and regulations for your review. We would be pleased to assist you in any way we can to help perpetuate a positive marine turtle program.

Sincerely,

E.C. Fullerton
Director"

In an extensive interview with *CHELONIA* and Virginia Handley (The Fund For Animals) in his Sacramento office on June 18, 1976 Mr. Fullerton provided the following information:

---That he had made an inspection tour of



E. Charles Fullerton photo by R.M. Christensen

the farm facilities in 1975 and found them impressive, likening them to fish hatcheries.

---Emphasized that the new company (Cayman Turtle Farm Ltd.) had not changed the farm's facilities or operating policies.

---That a representative of Mariculture Ltd.'s receivers had flown to Switzerland for a special meeting with IUCN officials in September, 1975.

---That the IUCN headquarters in Switzerland had *dropped its opposition to the issuance of a California permit to Mariculture on September 25, 1975.* The text of their letter is as follows:

"Dear Mr. Fullerton:

"Our previous correspondence concerning the issue of Class 1 or Class 2 Permits to Mariculture Ltd., Grand Cayman, has conveyed the view of IUCN that the operations of this Company have not been shown to be in the interests of proper conservation of the marine turtle resource. Such view had been formed principally because of doubts concerning scientific statements and claims made by the Company, and because of a lack of any long-term management planning to indicate how the Company proposed to achieve its aim of viable farming independently of wild turtle or egg stocks.

"Since the time of IUCN's original investigation, the management of the Company has changed and, in addition, the Company has been placed in Receivership. At the request of the Receiver, IUCN carried out another review of the Company's activities in August, 1975, *when an operational plan leading to anticipated viability was examined by a panel of IUCN experts.*

"Although IUCN retained some reservations regarding the feasibility of this plan, it nevertheless recognized that a reasonable effort had been made to formulate a management regime consistent with the spirit of IUCN's "Principles", and that *pledges of good intent* had been given.

"IUCN is therefore prepared to accept this as earnest of the new management's good faith and for as long as such good faith remains demonstrated and the provisions of the above mentioned operational plan adhered to, IUCN will raise no objection to the issue (*sic*) of a Class 1 or Class 2 Permit to the Company.

"Yours faithfully,

"Frank G. Nicholls
Deputy Director General"

Mr. Fullerton also provided *CHELONIA* with copies of the Class 1 permit issued to the turtle farm and to two wholesalers (Class 2 permits) retroactive to September 25, 1975. Copies of the subsequent Class 2 permits (a total of 6) were also provided.

A significant point---confirmed by Mr. Fullerton---is that *all* of the permits are due to expire December 31, 1976. This is the date that the California legislation allowing the permit system ceases to exist. Mr. Fullerton stressed that unless this date is extended by a new bill in the Legislature, importation or sale of the farm's products in California will be illegal.

REACTIONS

Curiously, with the exception of Dr. F. Wayne King (contacted by phone several days after the Fullerton interview by *CHELONIA*),

no one contacted by *CHELONIA*---including Dr. Pritchard, Dr. Carr (Chairman of the Sea Turtle Committee of the IUCN!), UC-Berkeley sea turtle specialists, or Los Angeles County Museum herpetologists---had heard of the IUCN decision, or seen a copy of the authorization letter. In fact, it appeared---at least to them---that a conscious effort by IUCN to keep the turn-about secret, or at least hushed-up, had occurred.

Several of the scientists used the term "outraged" to describe their reaction to the IUCN decision. Another snorted, "Who in the hell are these 'experts' the IUCN is talking about?" One particularly incensed individual openly suggested that a "deal" of some sort had been made with the farm's receivers. Dr. King flatly rejected any such charge, telling *CHELONIA* he would "burn the place down, if I knew that had happened."

The question of exactly who the "experts" were, as stated in the IUCN approval letter, has not yet been determined. It seems clear, though, that the top authorities in the field were not consulted.

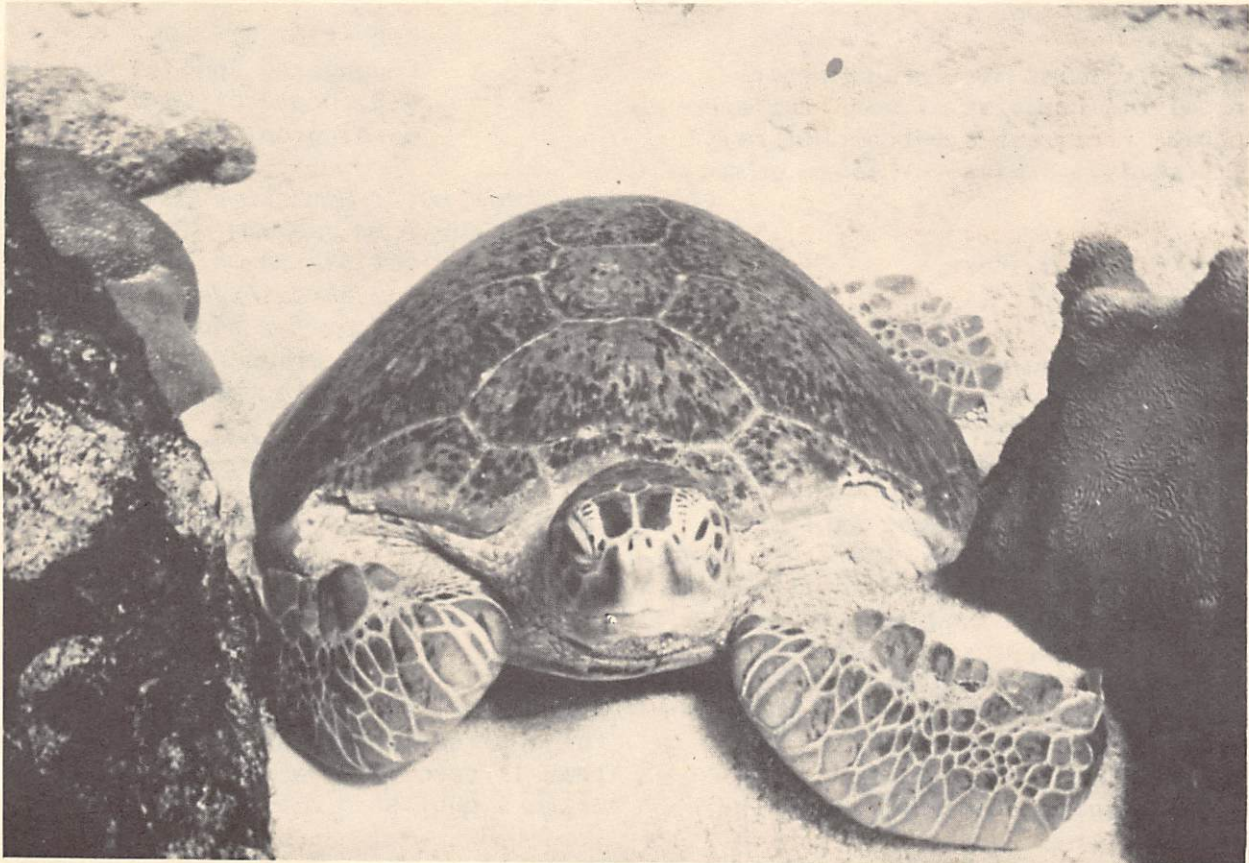
CONCLUSION

As of this writing, the "turtle farm" controversy has been renewed with greater vigor than ever before.

On one side, there are the new operators of the Grand Cayman farm---eager to promote a "product" they claim will be in the conservation interests of an endangered species. On the other side, there is almost unanimous opposition from the top scientific and conservation experts in the field to the farm and its operations. Technically in the middle is the California Department of Fish & Game---supporter in the past of turtle farming---but also ready to deny permits at the end of this year. Yet unheard from are the majority of conservation organizations, whose voices may well affect the future of Cayman Turtle Farm Ltd.

Whoever wins, the decisions reached in California will have immense impact on the rest of the United States---and on the green sea turtle.

(Report prepared by R.M. Christensen, with special thanks to V. Handley, and our staff.)



Photograph by Island Resources Foundation

Female *Chelonia mydas* underwater at Isla Aves.