

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM
THE TURTLE PEOPLE

by Brian Weiss

"The turtle him--that's all we got." With more than a little doubt, I looked from the sun-dried face of an old Miskito Indian woman to the lush tropical habitat surrounding us. With coconuts, manioc, deer and dasheen, it seemed most unlikely that the Miskito of eastern Nicaragua were really that dependent on the green sea turtle.

Two-and-a-half years later, I had completed a detailed study of Miskito subsistence and nutrition; it confirmed the old woman's statement. For the Miskito, the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is essential to the maintenance of social and subsistence systems. Commercial turtling, however, is making the turtle a rare commodity, and the result of increased exploitation is a diet lacking in both calories and protein.

Yet it is the Miskito themselves who are selling the turtles, in ever-increasing quantities, to outside companies. The film THE TURTLE PEOPLE presents the historical, economic and ecological factors that are leading the Miskito to sell their subsistence system.

The film is a study of ecological adaptation and economic maladaptation, illustrating how the ecological and social results of economic changes can turn what appears to be progress into peril. This case shows some of the complexities and subtleties involved when an indigenous population is integrated into a national and international economy. Although the details are specific to the Miskito, the processes are being repeated throughout the world, wherever large and small cultures meet.

The Miskito are selling and depleting a subsistence resource. By selling their subsistency system, they make an irrevocable decision to abandon a way of life that has sustained them for over 350 years. Yet it is a decision not really "made" by the Miskito, but rather by a combination of historical circumstances and outside entrepreneurs. Historical circumstances don't know, outside entrepreneurs don't care, and the Miskito can't see that their position is rapidly becoming untenable. Without turtles, the Miskito cannot live as they always have. Yet as a minority population, lacking education and a command of the national language, they are unlikely to make a successful transition to the cities of Nicaragua--nor do they have much interest in making such a transition.

The film presents the background of how the Miskito come to be in this position, where there are no good answers. It is a situation in which an ever-increasing number of indigenous populations find themselves as their natural resources become items of international commerce. Some groups, deprived of their land, wither after transfer to territories ecologically and physically different from their own. Others have been killed more directly, while governments looked the other way--or participated. For still others, such as the Miskito, the process is more subtle, although ultimately no less threatening.

THE TURTLE PEOPLE is not a visual ethnography of the Miskito Indians. The film is intended as a statement of conclusions about a situation--conclusions arrived at after 13 months of fieldwork, utilizing the available method and theory of anthropology. I disagree with those who wish anthropology to be neutral, collecting data but having no point of view, and I disagree with those who see the same role for ethnographic film.

Many people feel that "The ethnographic film maker is not writing a novel or expressing a personal agony" but is simply "interpreting what somebody else is 'saying'." There is certainly a role for such exposition, which attempts to present to viewers a world as seen by another culture. There is a more urgent need, however, for anthropologists to utilize their perspective to analyze and reach conclusions, and to use the unique capacity of film to present those conclusions to as wide an audience as possible. To do otherwise denies both our capability and our responsibility as anthropologists.