

## Excerpt from "Sea Turtle as a Flagship Species: Different Perspectives Create Conflicts in the Pacific Islands: Different Perspectives Create Conflicts in the Pacific Islands" 2005

"While generalities for cultural aspects over a geographic area as vast as the Pacific Islands can lead to misconceptions, it is worthwhile to note that Pacific Islanders, including those residing in Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, and CNMI, utilise and have a strong cultural relationship with their marine resources, including sea turtles (Johannes 1978; McCoy 1982; Campbell 2003; Frazier 2003). Turtles are an intrinsic part of the culture, subsistence, traditions, and folklore of the region (Balazs 1982; McCoy 1982; Campbell 2003). Traditionally, they are known to have played an important role in religious ceremonies, and perpetuated community relationships and identities through the exchange of turtle meat and turtle products (Johannes 1978, 1981; Balazs 1982; McCoy 1982, 1997). McCoy (1982:279) concluded 'that turtles contribute significantly to the overall cultural stability of the people [in the Marshall Islands]' and that 'their contribution in protein is not nearly as important as their cultural role'. However, the indigenous people residing in the US and US Pacific territories (Hawaii, Guam, America Samoa, and CNMI) lost their cultural rights to harvest turtles when the US Endangered Species Act rendered harvest illegal. They have since requested an allowable cultural harvest of turtles, green sea turtles specifically, to perpetuate and strengthen cultural identity<sup>10</sup> (McCoy 1997; Hara 2002; Ilo 2002). In this regard, sustainable use may allow turtles to assume a flagship role for indigenous Pacific islanders to promote cultural integrity (McCoy 1982, 1997; Hara 2002), and may further convey resource conservation ethics to younger generations (Johannes 1978; Morauta, Pernetta, and Heaney 1982; Spring 1982; McCoy 1997; Poepoe, Bartram, and Friedlander in press).

Although this concept may be controversial, islanders believe that strengthening cultural practices will revive traditional authority, resulting in limited harvest and increased protection of nesting beaches (Spring 1982; Ilo 2002); as has already proven to be the trend in certain Pacific Island nations, such as Fiji (spc no date) and Vanuatu (Petro 2002). It is the belief of elders in Papua New Guinea that, '[by] following old traditions, turtles will still be plentiful' (Spring 1982:295). Furthermore, socio-cultural studies conducted in cnmi by McCoy (1997) suggest that the continuation and regeneration of cultural practice could allow limited use, yet provide more effective conservation measures than laws imposed from afar.

This paper does not intend to provide an exhaustive review of the cultural traditions, uses or perspectives of sea turtles to native Pacific Islanders. Nor is it the place to argue the nuances of the terms 'traditional' or 'cultural'. It is our contention however, that sea turtles are ingrained in the cultural heritage of the region. Turtles played a significant role in traditional management systems, and conservation ethics, values, and attitudes were perpetuated as a result of the rules, rituals, and legends associated with turtle harvest (McCoy 2004).

Hawaiian protocol is built on a foundation of responsibilities that link people with their environment, and stress that 'cultural survival is entwined with sustainable

resource use' (Poepoe, Bartram, and Friedlander in press:8). The most important responsibilities are: 1) concern about the well being of future generations (meet present food needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs), and 2) self-restraint (take only what one needs, use what one takes carefully and fully without wasting) (Poepoe, Bartram, and Friedlander in press:12). spc11 (no date:6) suggests that '[t]he role of communities in turtle conservation hinges on their customs and traditional fishing practices.' This is supported by past studies by Johannes (1978) who documented traditional turtle management strategies through bans on taking nesting turtles and/or eggs, bans on disturbing turtle nesting habitat, and bans on consuming turtles (in addition to other strategies employed to manage fish species). These bans were a form of traditional management -- that provided a buffer on the number of turtles harvested -- based on kapu [rules] or 'taboo' system where by only certain members of the community (chiefs, priests, or only men) were permitted to eat turtles, 12 (McCoy 1982, 2004; Valerio 1985; O'Meara 1990); turtles were harvested for specific circumstances (weddings, funerals, religious ceremony, fiestas, the building of a canoe, et cetera) (Balazs 1982; Spring 1982; McCoy 1997, 2004); and some hunts were undertaken ceremoniously (McCoy 1982, 2004; Spring 1982; Ilo 2002). Furthermore, the existence of turtle shell money used as a possible exchanged medium points to its value and possible scarcity in the region (McCoy 1997).

McCoy (2004:39) provides a detailed account of an opening ceremony by the chief for the gathering of eggs and turtles in the Marshall Islands (first described by Tobin 1952). The ceremony includes chants, sacred offerings and rituals. The analysis of this ceremony gives insight into its practical means: '[r]ather than allow people to swarm all over the island, the iroij (chiefs) and senior people led the way and the food gathering proceeded in an organised, methodical fashion.' In the cnmi, certain food taboos and customs related to distribution of both live turtles and turtle meat played a role in limiting consumption and as a result may have lessened exploitation (McCoy 2004:39). For example, every turtle caught was brought to the chief, and both the head and best pieces belonged to the chief.

Woodrom-Luna (2003) provides a summary of numerous examples of tapu (traditional laws) employed throughout the Pacific Island region to manage turtle resources. For example, the natives of Tobi and Sonsorol (Palau) instituted tapu on eating turtle eggs and even placed fences around nests for their protection. Tapus were placed on taking eggs in Vanuatu and Western Samoa, and a Samoan chief is known to have placed tapu on a nesting beach. In Kiribati, it was tapu to harvest turtles on the beach, and the Enewetak Islanders (Marshall Islands) made several uninhabited islands into turtle reserves by forbidding the taking of turtle from those locations. In Tikopia (Solomon Islands), turtles were tapu to all but the people who claim it as their totem. In the Cook Islands, it was tapu for all but old men to eat turtle. In Fiji turtles were a great delicacy, eaten only at important feasts and then only by high-ranking persons. These are just a few of many examples from the region, most of which are entrenched in folklore, and support the notion that there is a cultural precedent for the use of sea turtles as a flagship species for traditional

management and conservation.

The use of the flagship concept to revive traditional authority of the kapu or taboo system by means of a cultural harvest in hopes to promote conservation ethics may (or may not) be realistic. Yet, it is unclear how effective these traditional resource management schemes were in the past (Frazier 2004), and there is incomplete understanding of how they would function in today's market economy, or how they would function among young generations influenced by Western culture (Spring 1982); nor is it clear if including turtles in cultural events would lead to patterns of behavior for responsible and sustainable interactions. McCoy (1982:275) acknowledges that 'the erosion of traditional taboos and the preference for modern boats over canoes have led to the disappearance of the protective buffer these customs once provided.' Yet, banning harvest altogether drives exploitation underground, which is ultimately detrimental to turtles and thwarts efforts for sustainable management (McCoy 2004).

The Bellagio Blueprint for Action on Pacific Sea Turtles (WorldFish Center 2004) recognises that harvest of turtles and/or eggs by local island communities is the fourth critical point to be addressed to recover turtles (see endnote 9). The authors, and others (McCoy 1997, 2004; Ilo 2002), contend that the costs of a limited harvest would be outweighed by the educational value. In other words, a limited and controlled cultural harvest would result in heightened awareness of the stock (biology, life history, threats, and status) and past cultural significance, which would contribute to an adaptive management approach and teach young generations the lessons and traditions revered by their ancestors (McCoy 2004). Undoubtedly, such efforts would also need to be supported by a tremendous amount of education and awareness initiatives (McCoy 1997). McCoy (1997) also suggests that a 'ceremonial' harvest (that is, turtle captured and then released) may accomplish these same objectives, such as that which has been accomplished in Taiwan (Balazs et al. 2000). However, depending on one's perspective, this flagship concept for cultural revival continues to create unresolved conflicts among numerous stakeholders (including the public, federal agencies, courts, native-rights groups and ngos) in Hawaii and the Pacific territories (McCoy 1997; Hara 2002)."