

Book Review

**The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean. Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making.**

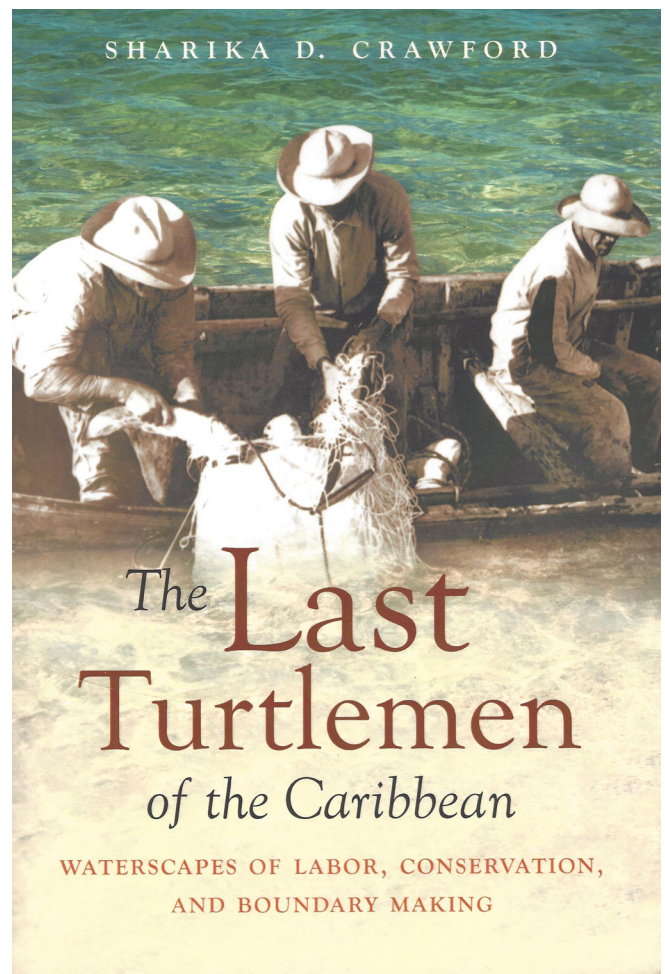
Sharika D. Crawford, 2020. Chapel Hill, North Carolina (University of North Carolina Press), xii, 204 p. \$95.00 (hardcover, ISBN 9781469660202), \$27.95 (paperback, ISBN 9781469660219), and \$21.99 (ebook, ISBN 9781469660226)

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Perhaps from the time of first human settlement along the coasts and islands of the Caribbean, the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) has been a source of sustenance. Its eggs were obtained easily along the sandy shorelines, and its meat has been much sought after by coastal peoples worldwide. As an added advantage, the shell and bones could be used as utensils and carved as tools. Although not as tasty as Greens, Hawksbill Turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), too, oviposited protein-rich eggs on the remote islands, and their beautiful shell has been desired by craftsmen through the ages in all parts of the world. When European imperial fleets, pirates, traders, and slavers entered the Caribbean, they found an “inexhaustible” supply of food in Green Turtles for their long voyages and to feed crews, workers, and slaves on land. Hawksbill scutes offered a further lucrative trade item. But the turtle populations were not inexhaustible, and nesting areas of former abundance, particularly in Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, and the Dry Tortugas, were decimated.

The Cayman Islands had abundant turtles but few other resources. The mahogany forests were quickly felled by the British, and the rocky soils were largely unsuitable for large-scale agriculture and difficult to clear. Sea-island cotton soon exhausted what nutrients there were. Because sugar cane was not suitable in the Caymans, the development of a large slave-based plantation system never developed, although slaves had been imported to fell trees and clear the land. When Britain ended slavery in 1807, there were few means for freed slaves and other residents to make a living on the islands. Although turtles had always been harvested locally, Cayman populations had essentially disappeared from overharvest by that time. Coupled with a lack of resources and economic opportunities on land, this forced the islanders to rely increasingly on turtling and other marine resources throughout the southern Caribbean. *The Last Turtlemen* is not about turtles *per se*, but about the effects of the Caymanian turtle fishery on the peoples and affected nations throughout the southern Caribbean Basin. As the author notes, the intention of the book is to “chronical the decline of Caymanian turtle fishing from the last decades of



the nineteenth century into the late twentieth century.” The interaction between the fishermen and indigenous communities, especially along the Central American coast, had profound effects on local economies, cultural exchange, and even national identities that persist today within this far-flung region despite the near extinction of many turtle populations and the cessation of international trade.

The book is organized into five chapters plus an introduction. The introduction provides an overall view of the turtlemen of the Cayman Islands, the region and its history, and a brief summary of the book's organization and the information the author intends to convey. Chapter 1 explores the basic biology of sea turtles, the interrelationship between turtle fishing and the indigenous peoples of southern Cuba and the vast area south of the Cayman Islands through coastal Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, and the unrestricted trade in natural resources that ultimately shaped the development of marine resource exploitation. Chapter 2 examines how the Caymanians adapted to resource exploitation, both terrestrial and marine, and moved onward and outward developing novel means to harvest turtles throughout an expanding sphere of influence. The expansion to long-distance turtling led to increased contacts among the diverse cultures inhabiting coastal Central America, particularly among freed African slaves, foreign-based traders, and indigenous communities from Honduras to Panama (Chapter 3). As a result of increasing contacts and conflicts, especially tracking a largely unregulated harvest of an increasingly depleted resource through disputed territorial waters, the turtle fishery facilitated the implementation of multi-national regulations regarding territorial boundaries (Chapter 4) and, later, to conservation efforts to prevent the decline of turtle populations (Chapter 5). The book ends with a conclusion, but more about that later. Much of the regulation resulted not from concern about turtle populations (indeed, there was precious little concern about turtles), but about political considerations regarding access to exploitation and delimitation of national boundaries.

The Introduction (*Navigators of the Sea*) sets the stage for much of the material that follows, but it notes that, despite the book's title, "the turtlemen's story – hunting sea turtles – is fascinating, but it is only part of a much broader story." Instead, this 14-page prequel sets the stage for an examination of how turtling formed a major foundation for geopolitical interaction and macroeconomic changes in the southern Caribbean. There really was little interest in the turtles themselves from government entities, and one gets the impression that even the Caymanians had little interest or incentive to worry about the status of turtle populations. As long as they could go somewhere else and exploit turtles, so be it. As a result, maritime boundaries and spheres of influence were redrawn, sometimes enforced by the might of the British imperial navy. As time went on, local indigenous communities and Caribbean nations made increasing attempts to assert national sovereignty over marine resources, feeding grounds, and offshore but sometimes far distant islands. International claims are debated to this day.

Chapter 1 (*Sages of the Sea, Turtles of the Greater Caribbean*) was the most disappointing chapter in the book. The author is not a biologist, so perhaps there should be some leniency for the many errors and awkward language that simply are not accurate. For example, Greens and Hawksbills do not have "a natural wanderlust" as they "circumnavigate

the tropical and subtropical pelagic waters around the globe." Mating frequently occurs at the surface of the water, and sea turtles do not copulate ashore; there are different species of sea turtles, not "varieties," and they are not "cold-blooded;" they are in the Order Testudines, not the "genus *Testudines*;" "circumglobal" does not mean that turtles (all?) do not spend their entire life cycle in the waters of a single country; flowers (in addition to plants ?) do not occur in seagrass beds; Kemp's Ridley does not have its major nesting site in the Yucatán; the attractiveness of Hawksbill scutes is not because they are made of keratin (all turtle scutes are made of keratin; Hawksbill scutes are thick and malleable making them ideal for fashioning inlays and jewelry); Hawksbills do not become "pregnant;" a vegetarian diet is not an unusual feature among (all ?) turtle species; and on and on. After reading this section, I was ready to throw in the towel. The author acknowledged assistance from the University of Florida Center for Latin American Studies, but she should have consulted the Archie Carr Center for Sea Turtle Research across campus. Fortunately, the rest of the chapter (a recounting of sea turtles in the history of exploration and imperial expansion in the Caribbean, other turtling indigenous communities, and the establishment of international markets) had a much more historical bent, was better written, and was far more informative. Clearly, these latter subjects are the author's forté.

Chapter 2 (*Out to Sea, Labor and the Caymanian Turtle Fishery, 1880s–1950s*) explains how Caymanian turtlers developed novel methods of catching turtles (e.g., by using numerous long nets with decoys and developing special turtle-hunting catboats [see Smith 1985] and schooners; Fig. 1) instead of jumping on swimming turtles or striking them with harpoons from canoes, methods employed by indigenous peoples. Coupled with domestic and multinational capital investment and marketing for varied products (e.g., oil, shell, powdered turtle tablets for making soup), these innovations turned the Caymanians from "itinerant turtlemen into an industry with an expansive global reach." Green Turtle, in particular, became a menu item in the distant cities of England and the United States, with turtle schooners reporting ca. 150 Greens per typical voyage in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 1930s, Thompson Enterprises, the third largest employer in the United States, could hold several thousand Green Turtles for slaughter for up to a year in its kraals in Key West. Turtling was indeed a big business. Unfortunately, as Crawford notes, the monetary rewards of this lucrative trade rarely were passed down to the crews who shouldered the dangerous sea voyages, what with unscrupulous boat captains and a form of marine sharecropping by investors and merchants on land; crews often were paid nothing for their efforts.

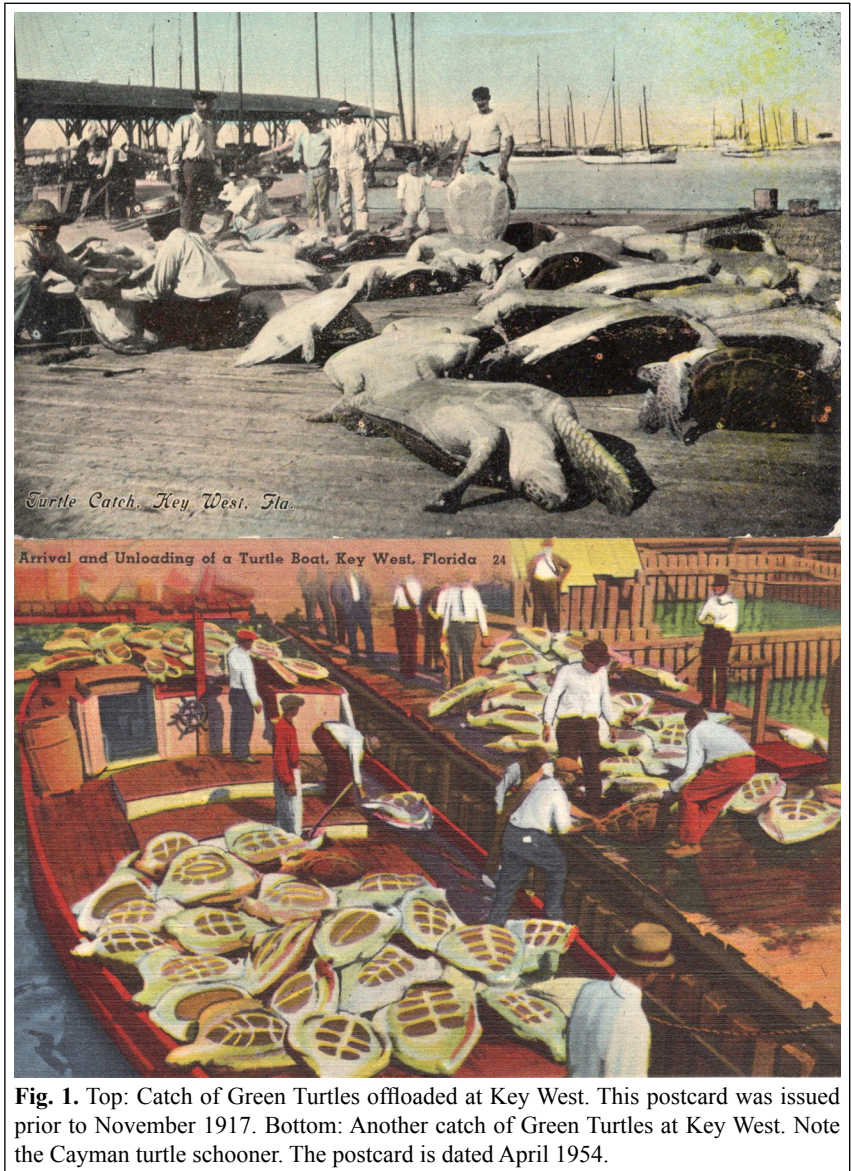
Chapter 2 is also when the book really starts to get depressing for a turtle biologist. The sheer volume of the capture and extensive areal extent of turtling begins to make one wonder why there are any sea turtles left in the Caribbean. Coupled with the slaughter was the waste associated



with “the product.” Many turtles died before market, and Crawford notes that Moore & Company, the largest turtle cannery in the United States in 1938, only used about 30% of the meat. In addition to this waste, the author recounts, without comment, the story that Hawksbills had their scutes removed by indigenous peoples and some turtlemen while alive, then were “returned to the ocean, temporarily or permanently disfigured but alive.” This illusion may have been the outcome in the minds of those involved. Hawksbills had their scutes pried off, often after heating over a fire, and were thrown back into the water, but survival was short-lived. A turtle could not live long after such trauma, and there was nothing humane in this practice and, indeed, in anything about turtling. As with Chapter 1, there are some annoying errors when writing about turtle biology: the Green Turtle is not the largest marine reptile, and Hawksbills are not “impregnated.”

Chapter 3 (*A Contact Zone, Mobility, Commerce, and Kinship in the Western Caribbean, 1850s–1940s*) explores the regional effects of Caymanian turtling prior to World War II. The lack of economic opportunity on land increasingly spurred Caymanians to turtling, with as much as 12% of the population involved in the industry. Far-flung sea voyages to the Mosquito Coast and Panama brought these very different cultures into contact, resulting in cultural exchange, increased trade, sharing of turtling information, inter-marriage, and, eventually, conflict over exploitation rights. I was surprised there was not more violence among the different nationalities over fishing rights. What also struck me was, quite frankly, the audacity of the Caymanian turtlers to think they had the right to exploit marine sources in the literal backyards of far-away nations and peoples, without interference. They had already brought sea turtle populations to near extinction in southern Cuba, the Caymans, and the Tortugas, and they, with the tacit blessing of imperial England (the Caymans have been a British overseas territory since 1670), just simply thought they could move on and turtle anyplace they wanted without regard for the indigenous population or status of the turtle stocks. Crawford doesn’t address this attitude anywhere directly, but it certainly lurks in the background of Chapters 3–5.

Chapter 4 (*Limits at Sea, State Claims, Territorial Consolidation and Boundary Disputes, 1880s–1950s*) delves extensively into what happened when Caymanian turtlers attempted increasingly to extend their fishing rights throughout the often-disputed territorial waters of the Central American coast and Cuba. As might be expected, the nations of the Ca-



**Fig. 1.** Top: Catch of Green Turtles offloaded at Key West. This postcard was issued prior to November 1917. Bottom: Another catch of Green Turtles at Key West. Note the Cayman turtle schooner. The postcard is dated April 1954.

ribbean (Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia), who had their own turtlers and marine claims to the shallow offshore banks, seagrass beds, and even remote islands, were not too thrilled when Cayman turtlers from the distant north competed with indigenous peoples for the turtle resource. The results were legal disputes, official confrontations, attempts to resolve conflicts through treaties, the development of multinational cooperation pacts, and sometimes hard feelings toward the interlopers, who were backed by the British Empire. Today’s international maritime boundaries and claims of sovereignty largely were foraged over questions of who had access in which areas for the purpose of exploiting Green and Hawksbill turtles. Some of these disputes have extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as discussed by Ankersen et al. (2015), a citation not referenced by Crawford.

Chapter 5 (*Save the Turtles, The Rise of Sea Turtle Conservationism, 1940s–1970s*) focuses on the era after World War II. Many events combined to shape these decades re-

garding turtling, not all of them the result of declining sea turtle populations: the increasing control by Central American nations over their offshore marine resources, particularly the assessment of taxes and fees on foreign turtlers and fishermen; the scarcity of fuel and manpower during the war; increased economic opportunities for Cayman Islanders elsewhere; and a shift from marine resource exploitation to international tourism as a dominant sector of the islands' economy. On top of that, the turtle populations *were* declining precipitously. Crawford discusses the great influence of Archie Carr's research and popular writing, especially in the books *The Windward Road* (1956) and *So Excellent a Fish* (1967), that called attention to the turtles' plight. She reviews early conservation efforts, particularly the establishment of "The Brotherhood of the Green Turtle" and the U.S. Navy's role in funding turtle research and conservation as the Navy sought to understand the Green Turtle's ability to navigate the ocean's waters. Unfortunately, multinational conservation cooperation in the 1970s proved elusive as certain government officials received international funding to develop a commercial export industry in Nicaraguan turtle products.

Carr was a pioneer scientist in that he was at home in the villages of the Caribbean and he respected and sought to understand local peoples and their knowledge of sea turtles; he literally spoke their language (both dialectal English and Spanish). He also could carry out innovative and scientifically sound technical research and be at home in academic and government circles, and he was never confrontational. His legacy, of course, cannot be overstated in the annals of conservation science (Davis 2007), despite the failure of Caribbean nations often to effectively come to terms with the status of their sea turtle populations. Recent data suggest increases in numbers and at least partial recovery in some populations of Green and Hawksbill Turtles, even in the Caymans (Blumenthal et al. 2021), which is certainly a result of Archie's and his students' commitment to turtle conservation. Still, harvest and poaching has continued into recent decades (e.g., Garland and Carthy 2010; Lagueux et al. 2014, 2017; Mejías-Balsalobre et al. 2021), although regional and local efforts are making inroads in sea turtle protection along the Mosquito Coast and southwards (Smith and Otterstrom 2009; Ankersen et al. 2015). It is fitting that Crawford recounts Archie's fundamental role in the saga of Caribbean turtling.

The last part of *The Last Turtlemen* (*Conclusion, Great Links of Chain*) is somewhat like the *Introduction*. Whereas the *Introduction* tells the reader what the author wants to get across in the book, the *Conclusion* tells us how the author apparently feels about how well she accomplished her goals. I found this section (p. 143–150) rather distracting and self-congratulatory. It reminded me of what a grad student might include in a thesis to ensure her committee got the point. A summary or conclusion would have been much more effective without the frequent use of "I." The author did a good job overall of demonstrating the importance of the Caymanian

turtle fishery in shaping much of the socio-economic-geopolitical nature of the southern Caribbean. Leave it at that.

As one can tell, *The Last Turtlemen* covers much important information, most of which might be surmised if one is familiar with the region and its fauna, history, and peoples. Be aware, however, that this is not fully a book about sea turtles, nor even about the lives of the Caymanian turtlers. Despite my concerns regarding the presentation of biological information on sea turtles, Crawford has done an excellent job of synthesizing a wealth of non-biological information on turtling from many sources (the book has extensive notes and a comprehensive bibliography from pp. 151–191). To truly understand the Caribbean turtle fishery – its history and long-term impacts – I would start with first-hand accounts of turtling (Duncan 1943; Matthiessen 1967, 1975), proceed to the popular works of Carr and accounts of his research, students, and interactions with turtlers throughout the Caribbean Basin (Carr 1956, 1967; Ake 2013), add background on the turtlers of the Miskito Coast (Nietschmann 1973, 1979), follow the saga of Green Turtle conservation (Rieser 2012; this book gives a much better overview of Green Turtle biology), and finish up with Crawford's *The Last Turtlemen*. Only then can one understand the complex interactions between humans and turtles in the Wider Caribbean and prospects for turtle populations in the future.

In the early 1970s, increasing demand for conservation of the Caribbean (and international) sea turtle populations, coupled with changing economics in the Cayman Islands and fewer and fewer turtlemen (due to advancing age and a lack of dependable crewmen), ended the era of the Caymanian turtle seafarers. CITES and the U.S. Endangered Species Act shut down nearly all international markets, shifting the Cayman government and private investors to focus on an eventually unsustainable commercial attempt to "farm" sea turtles (reviewed by Rieser 2012, but see Dodd 2012; now the Cayman Turtle Centre focusing on conservation and education). Intense lobbying efforts, legal challenges, and assertion of political influence that sought to override domestic law and international treaties eventually failed, and the important role of sea turtles in shaping Cayman Island and Caribbean culture now is largely recounted as history. In that regard, *The Last Turtlemen* represents an important contribution to understanding the region and in showing how an isolated and little-known island culture had dramatic regional influence on both distant societies and the marine environment. Sharika D. Crawford is an Associate Professor of History at the U.S. Naval Academy.

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