

Notes on Marine Turtles: 14—Albino Green Turtles and Sacred Ones*

by

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During the first week of September 1962, no less than three partially "albino" Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) were hatched among the large number emerging as part of our annual conservation programme on Talang Talang Besar island, in south-west Sarawak. Two of these hatchlings were about three-quarters white and one-quarter black on the carapace. The third was at first pure white—but subsequently very slowly developed additional tinges of blackness along the edges of some of the scutes (see Plate).

Such aberrant individuals are often sickly in nature. Although every attention was paid to the three, the two less white ones soon died. It proved possible, however, to keep the third alive until the 9 May 1963, eight months. But it developed slowly and sometimes had to be hand-fed during the period when a normal young turtle is becoming greedy and grasping food on its own. At death it measured nearly 4" x 3¼", weighed just over 4 ounces (having stuck at that weight since March).

The survival factor of white as a colouration at sea must be worse than nil. It would attract every shark and other predator to a species which is subject to an enormously high rate of predation in infancy, in any case. In the wild, any such distinctively marked baby coming off the beach might well last only a matter of minutes under natural conditions.

From the point of view of Sarawak Malay opinion, however, considerable importance attached to these creatures and they aroused much local interest. The nearly pure white one was proclaimed as a "Rajah Turtle". One school of Malay thought felt that it should be retained in a tank, which is what I in fact did

*For Note 13 in this series, see earlier in this same issue, where the previous 12 Notes are also listed.

with it. This opinion felt that if the turtle was liberated at sea it would draw all the other turtles away from Sarawak waters altogether,—in contradiction to a minority who felt it should be set free at the annual *Semah* ceremony in late May (see note 6 of this series).

As these two schools of thought were irreconcilable, it is perhaps just as well that the turtle died a natural death under the most loving conditions possible and in Malay hands, three weeks before the 1963 *Semah* was due. By a coincidence which was heavily noted in Kuching, this Rajah Turtle died on *the same day as* the third and last of the White Rajahs, Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, who passed away in London, aged 88, on 9 May 1963 also.

Such attitudes are due to the extreme rarity of albinism or anything like it. None of the Turtle Island staff or persons with whom I have been associated in this work since 1947 have even seen one such creature before. By the same token, in many seasons, totalling several years, of living in the Niah Caves while excavating, we must have seen millions and millions of *Collocalia* swiftlets, but only twice albinos.

However, such mystical ideas are, in West Borneo, also associated with deeper, proto-historical beliefs and feelings about turtles in general. This came to a head in another direction during early 1963 also. The Museum acquired two live specimens of the uncommon red-headed river turtle (*Callagur borneensis*)—which is also estuarine and goes out into the saline river mouths. Not long afterwards came the disastrous rains and major floods of January 1963, the worst in the country's history. The following item, taken from the front page of the *Sarawak Tribune*, 14 March 1963, outlines the story. It was published with a photograph of Acting Assistant Curator Loh Chee Yin handing over the turtle in question to the Mayor of Kuching, Mr. Ong Kee Hui.

A 'Princess,' said to be the daughter of the sea god, Neptune, was released in Kuching today and brought a sigh of relief to Chinese temple devotees who say that her captivity has been responsible for the torrential rains and floods that have hit the First Division.

The 'princess' is none other than the red-headed tortoise which was caught by Tua Kampong Dawi Aron of Kampong Semilang in January last year in the area of the famous Muara Tebas Chinese temple, at the mouth of the Sarawak River, and presented to the Sarawak Museum.

The temple devotees believe that since then Neptune has been so sad that he has sent the heavy rains and floods that have devastated the First Division areas. It was even speculated that the floods in Kuching would rise as high as the level of the Sarawak Museum to free the 'princess' from the tub she was living in—and where she has been put on exhibition.

This belief, according to the devotees, was substantiated at the Muara Tebas temple recently when at prayers calling for good weather a medium fell into a trance and said that only the release of the 'princess' would appease Neptune.

The medium further said that an appeal for her release should be made to Mr. Ong Kee Hui, President of the Hockien Association, which controls the temple.

A group of women representatives then called at Mr. Ong's house in Kuching to present the plea and a promise was made that something would be done.

An approach was then made to the Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Mr. Tom Harrison, for the release of the 'Princess' and today he agreed to hand it back to the temple through Mr. Ong Kwan Hin, father of Mr. Ong Kee Hui and also one of the trustees of the Muara Tebas temple.

However, Mr. Harrison said that in recognition for this courtesy the Hockien Association should present the Museum with a 'valuable piece of jade.' This was agreed to and at today's handing over ceremony Mr. Ong Kee Hui handed three jade Buddha statues to the Sarawak Museum. The Information Office, which acted as 'go-between,' will receive a parchment scroll asking the Tua Pek Kong to 'bestow countless blessings' on its work in the future.