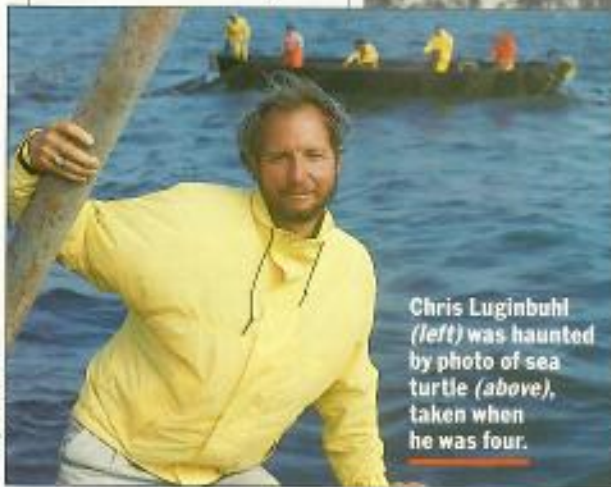


QUIPS, QUOTES & QUERIES

For the Month of October 1989

The Man Who Tracks Leatherbacks

ONA SUNDAY MORNING in 1951 Chris Luginbuhl's dad, David, and his two fishing buddies brought home to Ellington, Connecticut, the largest sea turtle ever seen, a 1,100-pound leatherback turtle eight feet high and wide, that they had speared in Long Island Sound. Chris, though only four at the time, remembers the stripe of dried blood that ran from the harpoon wound and the salty stench of the monster as it rotted in the hot July sun. For a few days the carcass hung from a tree in fisherman John Zahner's front yard. Thousands of spectators gathered, police directed traffic, an enterprising lad set up a lemonade stand, and every roll of film was sold from local stores. A prize-



Chris Luginbuhl (left) was haunted by photo of sea turtle (above), taken when he was four.

- Doyle Zuckow

- courtesy Chris Luginbuhl

winning photographer shot a remarkable picture of the turtle as it hung spread-eagled before the crowd. That photo changed Chris's life.

In years following, young Chris carried the picture to school, tucked in his pocket. His small chest swelled as he showed the prize to schoolmates, boasting that his father had captured the largest reptile of the sea. "I became totally obsessed with it," Chris, now 42, says. "No matter where I would go, I would have the old photograph with me and would show it to people."

But as the boy grew, the event diminished in significance; there were distractions. He married, raised three children, divorced, dealt with his father's death, and spent time in institutions recovering from alcoholism. Two decades passed before in 1980 he once again went looking for the haunting old photo. He found it pasted in a scrapbook at the Zahners' house, and it led him to the Yale Peabody Museum where the skeleton of his boyhood leatherback was the first ever to be displayed. There he met Tom Carr, a leading scientist who told him that science knew virtually nothing about the mysterious leatherbacks.

"On my way home from

Yale that day I decided that I was going to be the one to find out about the largest turtle in the world," he recalls now.

Chris asked George Mendonsa, a fisherman in Newport, Rhode Island, to call him whenever a leatherback became entangled in his nets. Mendonsa agreed, but was skeptical — in over 30 years only a dozen had been found. But miraculously the next day he discovered a leatherback in his net, and during that summer 18 more were caught. Each one was marked with a large white number and returned to the ocean. At the end of the summer a young 400-pound turtle was harnessed with a monitoring device.

So it was that 30 years to the month after his father harpooned the turtle, Chris rode aboard a boat in Newport, Rhode Island, chasing a leatherback for 18 hours. By some odd coincidence the boat's radar equipment had also been aboard the vessel used by his father. Through the night Chris and a team of scientists followed the shadow as it surfaced and dove to great depths.

Later they studied the leatherbacks' migratory patterns from New England's shores to warmer waters in Central America and the Ca-

ribbean. In time Chris and the scientists documented that the only known warm-blooded reptile is in danger of extinction because of garbage pollution. Many have been found dead with plastic bags in their stomachs, apparently mistaken for jelly fish, the turtle's natural prey. This past summer Chris and the scientists once again returned to Newport to try to track the leatherback, this time via satellite transmitter, for an entire year.

There are plans for a book and a film and a center for endangered species in Newport. Chris's business ventures in printing and real estate help him finance the project, but he's banking on his enthusiasm for "talking turtle" to raise enough funding to keep the project alive. As long as the money holds out, the adventure continues, and Chris never knows when the phone will ring and he will be off again to track the leatherback.

"I feel like I'm on a mission," he says. "We're going into the unknown."

— Christine Schultz

Anyone interested in learning more about or contributing to the project can write the David E. Luginbuhl Research Institute for Endangered Species, P.O. Box 263, Ellington, CT 06029.