

COOPERATIVE MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT  
IN THE TOKELAU ISLANDS

Proposal Submitted to the  
World Wildlife Fund-U.S.

by  
George H. Balazs

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## BACKGROUND

Tokelau is a group of three remote coral atolls located 500 km from Western Samoa in the South Pacific Ocean. The three atolls, Fakaofu, Nukunonu, and Atafu, have a total land area of 1000 hectares (4 square miles) with about 1600 native inhabitants of Polynesian ancestry. During the 1860's the population was only 200 following visits by Peruvian slave raiders and the introduction of disease. The group is currently administered by New Zealand through the Office for Tokelau Affairs based in Apia, the capital city of Western Samoa. There are no provisions for aircraft transportation to the atolls, but visits from Apia are made five times a year by chartered vessel.

The natural resources of Tokelau are considerably limited. Copra production and the sale of handicrafts are the chief sources of internally generated revenue for use in improving the quality of atoll life. The principal subsistence food crops include coconuts, bananas, breadfruit and taro. Local protein food sources are obtained mainly from the ocean and lagoon environments. Fish constitutes the most important staple, however, shellfish, pigs, chickens, sea turtles and sea birds also contribute to the native diet.

Sea turtles have historically played both a nutritional and cultural role in the Tokelau society. When a turtle is captured, custom still requires that it be shared among the members of the village. Turtles have traditionally been used in feasts and certain religious ceremonies. In addition, fishhooks, tattoo needles, and other implements have been fashioned from turtle shell and bone. In the past, turtles were considered as spirit gods to some families, and therefore were never harmed or eaten by the family members.



The sea turtles of Tokelau and their conservation status are not well known. The available information, as of November 1979, was included in one of the papers that I presented at the World Conference on Sea Turtle Conservation in Washington, D.C. Since that time, I have been able to correspond with school teachers on the atolls and personally visit the Office for Tokelau Affairs during a recent trip to Western Samoa. Discussions carried out with Mr. Hosea Kirifi, Director of Education, indicate that the Tokelau people are very concerned about the survival of their sea turtle resource as the result of decreasing numbers found nesting in recent years. Because of the mutual benefit that could be achieved through a fact-finding visit and information exchange by an outside sea turtle specialist, Mr. Kirifi encouraged me to propose a small cooperative project to the Official Secretary in charge of Tokelau affairs (Mr. J. P. Larkindale). This was subsequently undertaken and has been received with enthusiasm and the necessary endorsement by the Council of Elders on each atoll. The Office for Tokelau Affairs has agreed to sponsor travel costs and associated arrangements from Apia to Tokelau to conduct the sea turtle study visit.

The cooperative project set forth in this proposal will meet objectives identified in the Sea Turtle Conservation Strategy that resulted from the World Conference on Sea Turtle Conservation. The specific Action Projects of the Strategy document that will be addressed are as follows:

Action Project 135 - Maximize efforts to inform local people, particularly children, of the need to conserve sea turtles, emphasizing the need in terms of local cultural values.

Action Project 114 - Make available to less developed countries expertise in designing research programs, training in enforcement and management techniques best suited to the needs of each country.

Action Project 132 - Direct research efforts at subsistence use in various cultures to determine how local beliefs and customs may be incorporated into a conservation program.

Action Project 110 - Undertake or continue surveys in the Eastern Atlantic, Western South Atlantic, Eastern South Pacific, Western Pacific, and South Pacific.

Action Project 66 - Make available to less developed countries expertise in placement, planning, developing, and managing sea turtle parks, preserves, sanctuaries, and reserves suited to the needs of each country.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To gather current information on all aspects of sea turtles and their useage in Tokelau through personal interviews with fishermen and the Council of Elders on each atoll.
2. To provide current information to the people of Tokelau on conservation and management problems of sea turtles and the status of knowledge.
3. To ascertain current beliefs and customs that can be used to reinforce traditional sea turtle conservation practices in Tokelau, and possibly at other inhabited but resource-limited atolls in the South Pacific. The ultimate goal would be to achieve a balance between the useage of sea turtles for legitimate human needs, and the survival of sea turtles in sufficient numbers to ensure future viability of the population.
4. To make dossiers of educational and illustrative materials on sea turtles available to the head school teacher on each atoll.
5. To collect firsthand data on sea turtles by conducting, within the time available, surveys of nesting beaches and nearshore feeding and resting areas.
6. To establish a follow-up program of continuing assistance and cooperative information exchange on sea turtles between Hawaii and Tokelau.



## PROPOSED WORK

The basic work of this project that is necessary to achieve the stated objectives involves a study visit to the three atolls of Tokelau under the sponsorship of the Office for Tokelau Affairs. This visit will consist of travel from Apia by chartered vessel, which is normally undertaken only five times a year. The visit will last for approximately ten days.

Information that has thus far been obtained indicates that at least green and hawksbill turtles nest more frequently during the months of September through November. Although space aboard the chartered vessel is at a premium, the Office for Tokelau Affairs has tentatively reserved round trip passage for me on the mid-October 1981 voyage in order to take advantage of this nesting pattern. Tropical storms are more likely to occur from December through March, thereby reducing the chances for accomplishing a successful visit during this time period.

The initial results obtained from this study will be prepared into a report for the Office for Tokelau Affairs and the World Wildlife Fund-U.S. Copies of the report will be distributed to other appropriate agencies to stimulate further conservation action.

FUNDING REQUEST

An estimated \$500 in travel costs and other forms of cooperative assistance will be provided by the Office for Tokelau Affairs in sponsoring my visit to Tokelau from Western Samoa. The following budget submitted to the World Wildlife Fund-U.S. complements the Tokelau contribution and is essential to the conduction of the project.

Air Fare - Round trip between Honolulu and Western Samoa . . . . .	\$560
Living Expenses in Western Samoa 3 days prior to vessel departure, 2 days following return (5 days total @ \$35 per day) . . . . .	175
Photocopies and Photographs (To assemble educational dossiers on sea turtles) . . . . .	50
Total Funding Request . . . . .	\$785

Full payment is requested in advance if possible, and should be sent directly to:

George H. Balazs  
Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology  
P. O. Box 1346  
Kaneohe, Hawaii 96744  
  
Telephone (808) 247-6631 or 395-6409

Professional Affiliations of the Applicant:

Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology  
University of Hawaii (since 1971)  
  
Member and Deputy Chairman  
IUCN/SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group  
  
President  
Hawaii Audubon Society

Currently serving as a visiting researcher (1981-82) at:

Southwest Fisheries Center  
Honolulu Laboratory  
National Marine Fisheries Service



LITERATURE REFERENCES

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The Biology and Conservation of Sea Turtles, Smithsonian Press.

Hooper, A. and J. Huntsman. 1973. A demographic history of the Tokelau Islands.

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Macgregor, G. 1937. Ethnology of Tokelau Islands. Bernice P. Bishop Museum

Bulletin 146, Honolulu, 183 pp.

Wodzicki, K. and M. Laird. 1970. Birds and bird lore in the Tokelau Islands.

Notornis, 17, 4: 247-276.

September 18, 1981

Dr. George H. Balazs  
Assistant Marine Biologist  
University of Hawaii at Manoa  
Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology  
P.O. Box 1346  
Coconut Island  
Kaneohe, Hawaii 96744

Dear George:

I'm enclosing a check in the amount of \$785 to cover your expenses to travel to the Tokelau Islands to consult on marine turtle conservation. To verify receipt of the check, please return one signed copy of the enclosed form to my attention and forward a signed copy to our international headquarters in Switzerland. The third copy is for your own records.

A new Board policy now requires all grants to have expiration dates. This grant will cover the period through January 31, 1982. If for any reason your trip should be delayed beyond that time, any expenditure of the grant will require reapproval of the grant.

As we discussed we would like to have your report by January 31, 1982. We will also need a financial report with receipts. Any unexpended funds should be returned at that time. A form for financial reports is enclosed.

I'm enclosing a copy of Steve Cornelius's and Doug Robinson's proposal and would very much appreciate having your evaluation of it. We are particularly interested in having your comments on the project's importance to conservation of olive ridleys. If you know Doug and Steve, we would also welcome your assessment of their abilities to conduct the project and to work effectively in Costa Rica. Pending the outcome of the reviews, we are planning to take the proposal to our December 8th Board meeting and would like to have your comments by mid-November. Could I ask you to please copy Hartmut Jungius at IUCN on your comments?

I hope the trip to Tokelau goes well. We are pleased to be able to provide some assistance for the effort and will look forward to receiving your report.

Best regards,

Nancy E. Hammond  
Program Administrator

cc: Hartmut Jungius, IUCN