

GUEST EDITORIAL: APPROPRIATE TITLE?

In 1981 I visited the three small polynesian atolls of Tokelau to gather biological, cultural and historical information on sea turtles (Balazs 1983). Tokelau is a semiautonomous dependency of New Zealand, located in a remote area of the Pacific about 300 miles north of Samoa. The islands are visited only three to five times a year by a government chartered 150-foot cargo vessels. There is no regular transportation among the three islands, which are separated from each other by at least 60 kilometers. All together, there are some 1600 native inhabitants in Tokelau, and each island is governed by a Council of Elders. The Office for Tokelau Affairs in Apia, Western Samoa, handles all external matters for the island communities. There is no tourism in the islands, and any outside visitors must receive prior approval from the Council of Elders. Anchorage for vessels is very poor, because there are no passes leading into the sheltered atoll lagoons.

An impressive feature of life in Tokelau is the traditional community concept of "inati," whereby each individual receives from or contributes to the village his or her fair share. Fishing and agriculture are carried out on a subsistence basis. The atoll environment offers very limited natural resources. Canned goods are usually available only for a few weeks following each ship arrival.

While interviewing native fishermen in Tokelau, I was asked if I could direct them to a commercially available source of tortoise shell. I learned that the hook portion of their fishing lures from skipjack tuna is traditionally made from thick hawksbill scutes. The shank or spoon of the lure is made of pearl shell. Nothing else they have substituted matches the characteristics of tortoiseshell for this purpose. Tortoiseshell is said to have the correct strength so that, under heavy stress, it will break just before the more valuable and difficult-to-fashion pearl shell. Plastic and steel hooks have been used periodically on Tokelauan lures, but have never been found acceptable. Tortoiseshell is now very scarce in Tokelau. I suspect that at least a portion of their needs has been met during recent years by purchases from Apia. Hawksbills in Western Samoa have been severely depleted by overexploitation, but are still not legally protected.

The purchase of tortoiseshell through commercial sources, whether by Tokelauans or anyone else, almost always results in the taking of more hawksbills to satisfy the demand. For this reason, I refrained from telling the Tokelauans where they could buy tortoiseshell. However, I came up with an alternative idea, in view of the special role fish lures play on these islands, and the sincere efforts being made to retain cultural identity. I proposed the possibility of obtaining tortoiseshell at no cost from stocks already confiscated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In my published report (Balazs, 1983), I offered to investigate this possible source, if there was any official interest in my doing so.

I have recently received a letter to this effect, and am now further exploring the idea. At present, I feel that the donation of tortoiseshell would:

- 1) prevent more hawksbills from being killed and sold;
- 2) be a positive reinforcement to Tokelauan culture.

On the other hand, I can think of few negative factors to oppose such a plan.

I suppose one could argue that the tortoiseshell might be resold by the Tokelauans, possibly as a handicraft souvenir item. However, I believe that the chances of this are slight. Tokelauan handicraft is among the finest in the Pacific Islands, but none includes parts from sea turtles. In addition, all handicraft from the islands is transshipped to the Office for Tokelau Affairs in Apia where it is marketed internationally for the most favorable price. The top level administrators in the office monitor all of the items and sales, and are therefore fully aware of the situation.

One might also argue that if Tokelauans receive free tortoiseshell from the USA for subsistence cultural use, then other island peoples would also be entitled to it. My response would be that the Tokelauan situation is special, with the islands being isolated and a traditional life style reasonable intact. Each situation would have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. However, right now Tokelau is the only island group which has made such a request, and their circumstances seem to justify a donation of tortoiseshell.

In closing, I should mention that only about 20 kg of tortoiseshell would be involved in the Tokelauan request. It is my understanding that this quantity would last for at least several years and would be equitably distributed to fishermen by "inati" through the Council of Elders on each island. I would appreciate hearing any thoughts that readers of the MTN might have concerning this subject.

GEORGE BALAZS, etc. (Maybe you'd want to use your personal address instead of NMFS??)

MERCER UNIVERSITY

MACON, GEORGIA
31207

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

George Balazs
NMFS Honolulu Lab.
PO Box 3830
Honolulu, HI 96812

31 December 1985

Dear George:

Thank you for your letter concerning the Tokelau fishermen and their need for hawksbill shell. I find it very interesting and would like to print it (with some slight editing) as a "guest editorial" in the MTN. What do you think of this? I have attached an edited version I'd like to print, but of course will do nothing until I hear from you. Please feel free to make any changes or to opt out altogether if you prefer.

Personally, I can't imagine why anyone would object to such a request. It seems perfectly reasonable to me. Of course, there are always those die-hard hot-heads who will accuse you of "promoting trade in sea turtle products!"

In response to your request to hear my personal thoughts on the matter, I can't think of any reason **not** to honor the request of the Tokelauans. Of course, there may be regulatory hassles, paperwork, etc. And also, one must worry about setting legal precedents. That is, in the absence of written guidelines (and who in his/her right mind would want to draft them?) where does one draw the line once you allow the USFWS to dole out its hawksbill shell? Still, on a gut level, my intuition says that the request is a just one and should be honored.

Sincerely,
Nat B. Frazer



P.S. I have **not** proof-read this yet!