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Leach Street, Marmion WA

2nd August, 1984.

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Dear George,

Thanks for the various pieces of information you've sent.

I recall reading somewhere that you are looking for information on poisonous hawksbills. You can use the following as "Johannes, pers. comm." if you wish.

In Torres Strait hawksbills are occasionally poisonous - and no other species (they eat lots of greens). A number of people have died from eating hawksbills. Today many people are afraid to eat them, but those who "know" how to cut them up still do. "Proper" cutting up involves tilting the inverted turtle to one side so that the guts slide to the opposite side from where the incision is made, so as to avoid cutting the guts. Then the turtle is tipped in the opposite direction when the cut is being made on the other side. The most dangerous part is generally considered to be a whitish gland on the trachea. My field officer watched a turtle being butchered this way, ate some of it (said it tasted terrific - better than green turtle) collected the "organ" and sent it to Dr. Clive Wilkinson at AIMS who may or may not get around to sending it off for analysis to somewhere in the U.S. He has a theory that the poison may be derived from toxic sponges. There was some talk among the fishermen that maybe the gall bladder was bad news too - but most of the guys who seemed most knowledgeable seemed to feel that this white gland was the bad one.

Just returned from an expedition to Northern Arnhemland where I was working with Aboriginal fishermen who routinely eat greens, flatbacks, loggerheads, ridleys, and, to a lesser degree, hawksbills. They also say that hawksbills, and only hawksbills, occasionally kill people or make them sick. They claim that a good fisherman can tell whether a hawkbill is poisonous or not by the color of the plastron - if it has a dark yellow-red tinge it's poisonous. (These guys are not very inspiring informants, so I'd take that with a grain of salt.) They also say that the eggs are sometimes poisonous - again, only in hawksbills. If the yolk is dark yellow to reddish they are poisonous. If lighter yellow they are OK. The poisoning is sufficiently rare (and Aborigines so incredibly omnivorous) that many people will take their chances and eat hawkbill eggs or flesh - or at least that's what I'm told.

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I was also told that greens lay at this time of year and both day and night. I was a bit sceptical on both counts, on the former count

on about July 20

because greens lay only during the months around Xmas to the east in Queensland and to the west at North West Cape. However, an hour after I was told this I found a green digging a nest at 2.45 p.m. on a bright sunny day. It was killed and eaten. It had a full complement of eggs ready to lay and another set of "yolks" that were virtually as large as the shelled eggs.

Cheers,



R.E. Johannes

P.S. would very much like to see what you come up with on this subject.