

*Off Sample Grave*

Notes on Marine Turtles: 18—"A Report on the  
Sarawak Turtle Industry (1966)—with  
Recommendations for the Future"

TOM HARRISON



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**Notes on Marine Turtles — 18: "A REPORT ON  
THE SARAWAK TURTLE INDUSTRY (1966)—  
with Recommendations for the Future"**

by

TOM HARRISON

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*[Paras. 43-81 of the main text, which carry some confidential and sometimes controversial recommendations, still under review, are omitted from the present publication. TH.1*

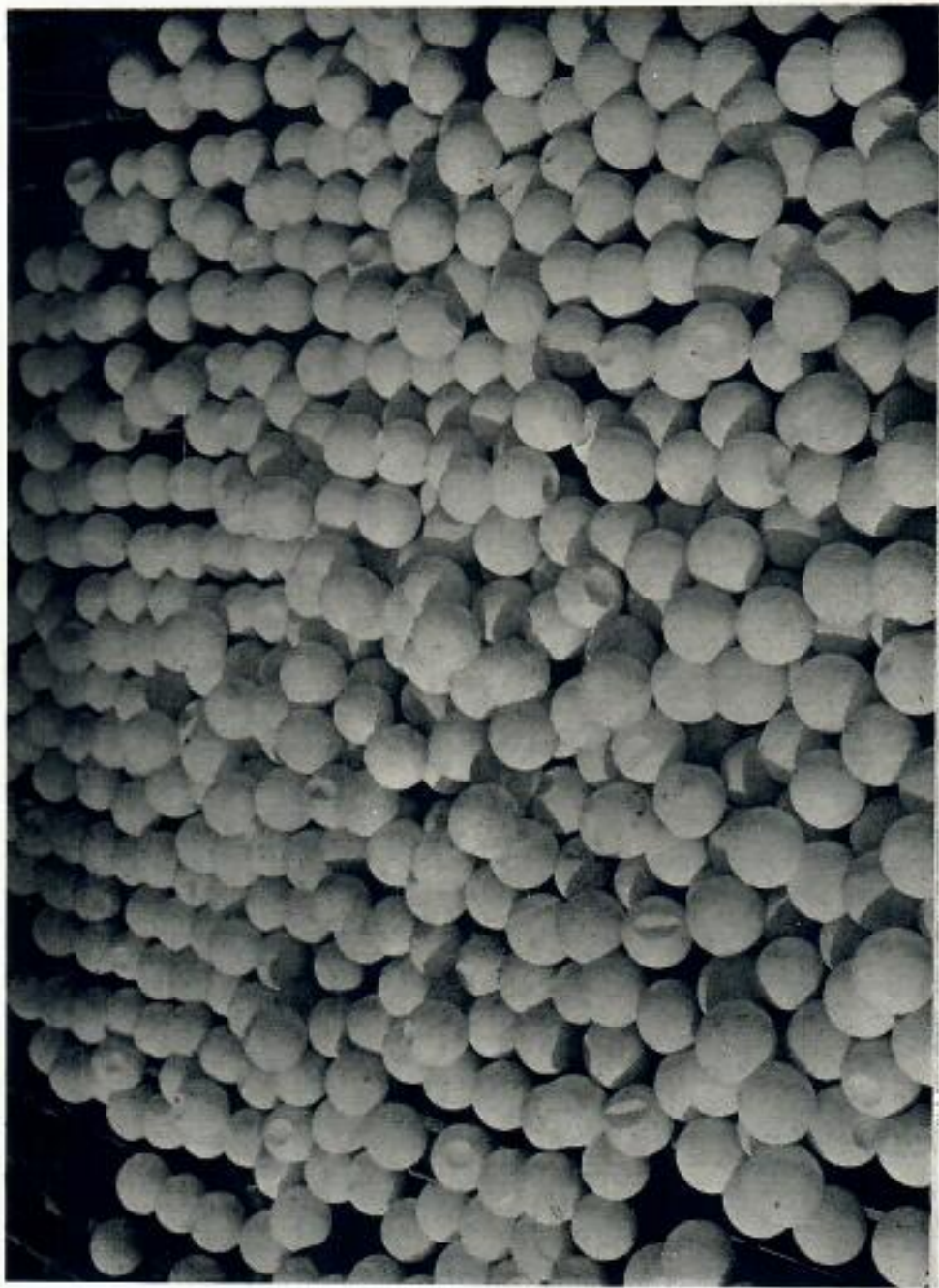


PLATE L: Fresh Turtles eggs drying in the morning sun. An unprecedented drop of turtles egg collections occurred on Sarawak's three Turtle Islands during 1966.

## III. "The Golden Days"

6. Until World War II the collecting of the eggs on the three off-shore islands (there are no other significant turtle colonies in Sarawak waters) was the monopoly of the Malays and run as private business by a few leading families. But there was some dissatisfaction about these operations, culminating in Rajah Sir Charles Vyner Brooke taking control and vesting sole authority for running the islands in the Curator of the Museum (then Mr. E. Banks).

7. The Japanese occupation interrupted the re-organisation which Banks had begun; so when I took over as next Curator in 1947 the situation was chaotic and the staff and other conditions deplorable. In the following years, with powerful authority vested under the Brooke law, large scale improvements and re-organisation was possible. As a result, very large profits were made—for instance, in one year alone enough to buy a launch exclusively for the industry, the *Burong Rawa*. I had (and enjoyed!) direct authority and close control on everything at the islands—and it worked.

8. But under the Colonial civil service system one man rule was unacceptable. It was felt that too much power was vested in the Curator; and the Turtle Trust was primarily concerned with distributing the profits and had no effective jurisdiction in island matters. [A series of new steps were then initiated, by which the Financial Secretary and then a new body, the Turtles Board, eventually took over all real authority—even to the extent where the Curator had (and has) no vote in Board meetings, is simply the Executive Officer, honorary adviser].

9. A proportion of these changes were necessary, in keeping with the times. But some of the arrangements were not really designed to deal with the very special, localised circumstances of operating a most unusual industry on three remote islands, under conditions where bureaucratic control was impossible in practice, however good it might appear on paper. The Rajah understood these conditions from long experience. The Colonial Office did not.

10. At the same time—and again largely of necessity (keeping up with the times)—conditions for operating the industry and the employment of staff were more and more brought into line with ordinary Government practice. In particular, instead of the egg marketing and other Kuching end of the business being done as part-time work by the Museum clerk (handling, at that time, up to \$100,000 in a year on turtle business alone) a separate office was set up. In all Parkinson's Law respects the organisation became elaborate, except only that the Curator continued to act without payment despite his much enlarged responsibilities (e.g. the paper work which had been negligible before 1953, by 1963 had become a very significant proportion of all documentation passing through the Museum department).

11. These matters are emphasised, not in any sense of criticism or complaint, but as facts of life. Unfortunately, they are the facts of civil service bureaucracy rather than of running a business under exceptional conditions; and a business itself subject on the one hand to unpredictable variation of nature, and on the other to the rather more predictable human weaknesses which are liable to influence results in remote places difficult to supervise, especially when direct contacts and personal decisions of responsibility became modified in a more elaborate and Kuching-minded system.

12. It is not suggested, of course, that any of these developments and changes are of themselves directly or solely responsible for the present poor situation. But they have materially contributed. And they are of special significance now in that the whole industry has become top heavy with office and related administration, and with uneconomic fixed salaries to permanent island, year-round staff as well. During 1965, eleven full time workers on the three islands collected 419,066 eggs; on the three comparable islands in Sabah, *a single Suluk, Siguri, working part-time*—i.e. not in the monsoon—with the aid of the children and, at the peak, of two elderly widows (on a percentage basis) collected 461,465 eggs.

13. I take my fair share of responsibility for this state of affairs. I am also deeply sympathetic to the staff, particularly those who live in the exposed island conditions and who have indeed shown

real courage and fortitude in remaining at their work through Confrontation, within open sight of Indonesia.

#### IV. *Main local reasons for egg decline*

14. Some of the inside factors have been indicated above. Others lie outside the control of anyone in Sarawak and are largely responsible for reducing the egg revenue far below the Turtle Board's expenditure (para. 21).

15. I have previously submitted to the Ministry a statistical analysis of the egg trends in recent years and will not burden this report with more figures—these are readily available if required. But, put very briefly, what has happened is this:

1900 — 1940 Slow decline.

1941 — 1945 Serious interference by Japanese, including eating turtles and using the exposed rocks off Talang Talang Kechil as a bombing range.

1947 — 1955 Egg yields regularly over one million, plus extensive conservation and rearing of baby turtles to renew depleted population.

1955 — 1965 Downward trend continuous, despite conservation; this is accentuated by the much increased disturbances around the islands, motor boats and large steamers, culminating in the bauxite mining operations at Sematan from 1957.

1966 Unprecedented spectacular drop to below 100,000 eggs—or less than 10% of the pre-1955 average yield (see further below at para. 26).

16. Several influences have been of paramount importance in counteracting the efforts to conserve the turtles and ensure a steady population for the future. To appreciate these, please realise that the Green Turtle, with which we are exclusively concerned in these waters, is basically a very shy and even timid animal. It *never* comes ashore except to lay eggs, and where

possible avoids any disturbed situation—unless the natural biology of laying compels it to come ashore. The average female turtle lays two or three times within a period of two or three months, mostly between May and September. It then leaves Sarawak waters completely and migrates out into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It does not return for at least three years to lay again (those in the Caribbean sometimes lay every two years, but in general three is the world wide pattern).

17. The Green Turtle is also, in evolution, one of the oldest vertebrate animals in existence. The term "living fossil" is almost applicable here. This turtle has evolved over many millions of years, in a situation where it had no numerous enemies. Man, who came into the picture less than a million years ago, started devastating the turtles for their flesh back in the stone age (turtle remains are numerous in the Niah Caves). This caused the turtles to retreat to the off-shore islands and remoter beaches. What we have, therefore, on Sarawak's three islands is in itself only a pale echo of a past where turtles were once crawling all over the place from Kuala Belait to Tanjong Datu.

18. Now this strange and ancient creature is, no doubt, unable to believe her eyes, when she returns from, perhaps, thousands of miles away, three years after setting out, and is suddenly confronted with speed-boats and the foul bilges of the Japanese bauxite steamers; with the day and night arc lighting at Sematan confronting the islands and setting up reflections on the water. And since the weakening of the Curator's authority to control the islands, with VIP visitors running outboards round and round fishing for "sport" in the evening as the turtles are coming in; and so on . . .

19. If the island beaches were a few miles long, this would give worried turtles a margin of manoeuvre. Unfortunately, these tiny spaces are specially vulnerable to even small scale disturbance from the turtle point of view.

20. Under such circumstances, the reaction for a normally intelligent but highly conservative turtle is to go and lay elsewhere. I have fought battle after battle over the years to keep

## GROSS COLLECTIONS OF EGGS FOR 1965 AND 1966

<i>Month</i>		<i>1965</i>	<i>1966</i>
May	... ..	22,706	6,296
June	... ..	45,674	8,877
July	... ..	86,067	14,706
August	... ..	98,644	15,274
September	... ..	69,462	13,826
October	... ..	34,679	10,432
November	... ..	18,678	6,701
December	... ..	10,280	6,000 (and estimated)
		<hr/> 419,066	<hr/> 99,307

27. A drop from 400,000 to 100,00 is unprecedented, here or anywhere else within my knowledge. This runs in contradiction to all the known trends and appears to me to lie outside the range of statistical or logical probability. It will be noticed that the difference between January 1965 and January 1966 is negligible (within the range of statistical chance). Then in February and March the discrepancy is on the scale of two to one as between the two years. In April it goes up to three to one, in May nearly four to one and after that stays around or above four to one through the height of the "season", even reaching six to one in the July-August peak.

28. If these egg figures are expressed in terms of laying turtles, the figures become even more disturbing. Allowing a conservative estimate of two lays per female turtle, we have less than 500 animals coming ashore in 1966 (as compared with 2,000 in 1965).

29. If anybody had asked me, in March, if this scale of collapse *could have occurred* I could surely have produced irrefutable arguments to demonstrate that it could NOT. How wrong can one be? Anyway, it is this collapse which now presents the Board with a short-term prospect approaching emergency.



## VII. Remedies—suggested action:

30. There are five lines of approach suggested to remedy the present situation:

- (a) reconstruction of the Turtles Board and its function,
- (b) reorganisation of staff structure and recurrent expenditure,
- (c) new marketing system for the eggs,
- (d) improved island control,
- (e) new arrangements for Satang Island.

31. In the following subsections, each of these will be briefly discussed. It must be emphasised that these are personal ideas, and I have not tried to put them into legal or Treasury terms at this stage.

(a) *Reconstruction of the Turtles Board and its function*

32. The present Turtles Board is an excellent instrument for exercising moderate control and developing gradual policy in conditions of continuing stability and economic success, but is not designed to meet recent developments and the now economic crisis. No doubt intentionally, the Board's membership is heavily weighted in the direction of the quite separate Turtles Trust and related Majlis Islam interests, with their legitimately special but necessarily rather conservative points of view.

33. Moreover, the Board loses strength in not being directly responsible at a high ministerial level, so that it is left rather off on a ledge of its own. This has advantages in good times, but not now (in my carefully considered opinion). [I suggest that the Chairman of the Board should be either the Minister for Welfare, Youth and Culture, or his Permanent Secretary].

34. I further suggest that the membership of the Board be broadened by the introduction of at least one Chinese businessman, connected with marketing of eggs and other such produce (cf. paras. 53-55 below).

35. If possible, also, a representative of consumer interests, perhaps a housewife, should be included.

36. Additionally, the Curator of the Sarawak Museum should become a full member of the Board, with an official voice and vote in its deliberations (cf. para. 61 below).

37. The Board should continue to own and control its property on the islands, and to decide policy—particularly as regards the price of eggs, profiteering, etc., etc.

38. The Board should also continue to be responsible for all general interests which affect the island beaches and the turtles generally, especially with a view to ensuring a maximum population is maintained, consistent with an economic exploitation sufficient to attract Contractor business (see further at (d)).

39. A new and important function of the Board will be to decide who should have the rights to collect and market the eggs from year to year—the major innovation which I propose (see (c) below).

40. The commodious Board office should be closed and the room revert to the Sarawak Museum. The Board, and indirectly the Trust, have been living on the charity of the Museum for years, occupying valuable space without rendering any return payment or service. I understand from the new Curator that he urgently requires this space as part of the extension of the archives service, desired by Government. In any case, if my recommendations are followed, there will be no further need for an office of this sort, which becomes a liability (cf. para. 45).

41. The paper work, and particularly the elaborate accounting system required by Government regulations, will be eliminated if following proposals are accepted and the approach becomes "strictly business". Existing papers should be transferred to the care of the Museum (Archives). Further paper work to be kept at ABSOLUTE MINIMUM.

(b) *Reorganisation of staff structure and recurrent expenditure*

42. The 1965 audited accounts of revenue are taken for the basis of the following discussion. They are given in full in Appendix A.

## Appendix A

## TURTLES BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31ST DECEMBER, 1965

1. Staff P.E., Seasonal and Special Fees	\$26,030.05	
2. Running of M.L. "Burong Rawa" ...	1,920.00	
3. Uniforms and Waterproofs ... ..	338.94	
4. Maintenance of Buildings and Furniture ... ..	173.50	
5. Office Expenses ... ..	546.35	
6. Stores and Materials, etc. ... ..	1,604.57	
7. Annual "Makan Selamat" ... ..	370.85 <sup>(*)</sup>	
8. Inspections and Visits ... ..	439.19	
9. Bonus Scheme ... ..	—	
10. Conservation ... ..	35.90 <sup>(xx)</sup>	
11. Water and Light ... ..	100.00	
12. Staff Retirement Scheme ... ..	1,109.50	
Excess of Receipts over Payments	1,831.41	(profit)
	<u>\$34,500.26</u>	

## Notes:

- (\*) 7. The 1965-66 cancellation of "Semah" rites (due to the Majlis Islam's new rules) and great reduction of scale for this occasion is wrongly felt by the peoples of the area to be partly responsible for the present sad state of turtle affairs!
- (xx) 10. *Conservation*: this figure does not represent anything like the real conservation effort or costs in this and previous years, since new routine and paper work came into force. Much of the expense of this aspect has been borne out of the Museum votes and under Museum staff supervision, and *not* charged to the Board. Under any *new* arrangements, it will be necessary to allocate extra funds to the Museum for this purpose (see para. 75 (c) in main text) but they can carry over for 1967.

## Appendix B

## GROSS COLLECTIONS OF EGGS FOR 1966

Month	Talang2 Besar	Talang2 Kecil	Satang	Total
January ... ..	995	3,988	515	5,498
February ... ..	344	3,055	492	3,891
March ... ..	410	2,786	279	3,475
April ... ..	847	2,948	536	4,331
May ... ..	1,939	3,633	724	6,296
June ... ..	3,461	4,876	540	8,877
July ... ..	6,242	7,043	1,421	14,706
August ... ..	6,385	6,996	1,893	15,274
September ... ..	4,129	7,218	2,479	13,826
October ... ..	2,688	5,309	2,435	10,432
November ... ..	1,857	3,490	1,354	6,701
December ... ..	1,076	3,352	1,108	5,536
<b>TOTAL ... ..</b>	<b>30,373</b>	<b>54,694</b>	<b>13,776</b>	<b>98,843</b>

[Corrected as from para. 26; December figure]

## Addendum

1967 (marked improvement on re-organisation)

## GROSS COLLECTIONS OF EGGS FOR 1967

Month	Talang2 Besar	Talang2 Kecil	Satang	Total
January ... ..	1,916	3,193	529	5,638
February ... ..	2,017	3,193	110	5,320
March ... ..	3,011	5,540	—	8,551
April ... ..	4,386	8,015	274	12,675
May ... ..	11,180	12,448	961	24,589
June ... ..	29,887	21,013	2,184	53,084
July ... ..	46,027	34,733	6,268	87,028
August ... ..	54,558	34,540	10,749	99,847
September ... ..	38,057	31,583	10,204	79,844
October ... ..	21,187	23,836	6,596	51,619
November ... ..	10,577	17,308	3,204	31,089
December ... ..	5,687	12,200	1,436	19,323
<b>TOTAL ... ..</b>	<b>228,490</b>	<b>207,602</b>	<b>42,515</b>	<b>478,607</b>

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