

BOOK REVIEW

Title: Tales from the Thébaidé: Reflections of a Turtleman of Some Uncommon Turtles

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Author: Peter C.H. Pritchard

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For those of us who study marine turtles, the Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation is an annual treat, a time to contemplate what colleagues from all over the world, in various fields, have learned about the biology and cultural impacts of these amazing creatures. Those of us with sufficient discipline to examine the program in advance will also look to see if Peter Pritchard is scheduled to speak. When he does, it's always a performance graced with a unique combination of eloquence, insight and authority since his world wide studies include original and important contributions to all the topics of interest to the attendees. This same scenario plays out at other meetings, spanning herpetological, zoological, and hobbyist realms to mention just a few. There are few scientists today who have visited so many remote places to study turtles in their natural surroundings, or who can match Peter in knowledge about their paleontology, systematic relationships, and natural history. Nor are there many who have seen (and collected in some form) every currently recognized genus. Even rarer still is the scientist who can tell you how those species are surviving in the midst of humans who sometimes revere them, but more often exploit them to the point where their continued existence is seriously threatened. These issues, and a host of other topics and adventures, are covered in his book which, in reality, is about a lot more than just tales of turtles by a "turtleman".

The book consists of 28 chapters loosely grouped into topical sections. They describe Peter's experiences in the Galapagos (4 chapters), 9 chapters on Sea Turtles dealing with his studies on Ridley *arribadas*, their exploitation, and the search for management solutions, as well as several critiques (of Mrosovsky's book on the sustainable use of hawksbills; of the IUCN's red list system). One chapter describes his early schooling ("Old masters remembered") and several others, grouped as "Personalities and History", explore his ancestry, friendships and associations with everyone from scoundrels to respected and honored colleagues. "Speeches" (5 chapters), and two concluding chapters grouped as "Essays" discuss the history of private natural history collections, including that special and very individual assemblage of living and preserved specimens, books, reprints, videotapes, art and other resources collected by Pritchard and housed at the Chelonian Research Institute. The latter is Peter's *Thébaidé*, defined as "...an...intellectual retreat...where conversation, scholarship, and scientific and literary discourse are sacred." (Warning: there are a host of totally unrelated definitions!) Two chapters begin the book and stand alone. The first is a portrait of Archie Carr ("The Master Turtler") as a world class natural historian, advocate for conservation, and inspiration to his students and those

who were so entertained and educated by his writing. For those of us who became interested in turtles after his death, this chapter will be a particularly welcome introduction to a significant predecessor. The second, an overview of tortoise diversity in morphology, natural history and behavior, serves as an introduction to the biology of this fascinating group of "armored reptiles".

Each chapter, as one might expect, is vintage Pritchard. All are entertaining, original, often breath-taking in scope, provocative, and written with insight as well as patience and good humor. That quality is especially evident when dealing with controversial issues, including those where he disagrees with others. He also describes his friends and collaborators, a remarkably wide range of characters that he portrays with skill; all are entertaining though some (at least to me!) lacked appeal, but all are interesting none the less in Peter's voice.

The turtles, as expected, are treated with appropriate reverence and their brutal exploitation is frequently, and often depressingly, described.

Peter generously honors many esteemed colleagues, some whose virtues were as organizers and facilitators in the conservation effort (e.g., Hall Scott, President of Florida Audubon) while others were scientists working under difficult circumstances (Leo Brongersma; Jacques Fretey). At the opposite extreme is a dark character (Antonio Suarez) in the form of a Spanish entrepreneur who saw an opportunity to exploit Mexican turtles for leather; that led to the construction of a butcher shop in Oaxaca and the slaughter of about one million Olive ridleys. Despite this, and appeals to the government, Peter continually engaged the man in discussions, hoping he might be convinced through rational discourse that the killing of so many gravid females (captured from aggregations fronting *arribada* sites) was in the long run not a virtuous or sustainable enterprise. One of Peter's most appealing qualities comes out in this discussion; he never loses patience trying to win over even the most rabid of exploiters. In the end, though, it was social pressure combined with appeals from his youngest daughter that convinced Suarez to sell the business (only to find that he switched to another disastrous target in commercial fishing, using nets "...specifically designed to catch lots of marine mammals!").

A book that covers such an array of topics will have something for everyone. For me, there were several particularly rewarding chapters. As a field biologist, I thought I'd seen my share of mishaps and dangers but these were miniscule compared with the close calls in the rugged terrain of the Galapagos, where the dangers of sunstroke and a potential for underestimating the need for water were always looming. At one point, Peter's group was forced by such a shortage to "filter" water from a wallowing site used by tortoises through sweat-soaked clothing and boil it just to survive a return to safety.

Another was his realization that the solution to the survival of sea turtles nesting in the Guianas was involvement of the local population in the effort (now common thesis, but at the time most original). He writes,

"Finally, I hit upon the obvious. The epiphany occurred while I was in a beach camp, alone, with five camps of energetic turtle hunters,

totaling nineteen people, deployed east and west of me. It seemed hopeless. Yet, we were able to establish a neighborly, cooperative relationship, and I finally realized that the traditional paradigm of good against evil simply did not apply. These were decent, friendly people, trying to feed themselves and their families, and who considered killing a turtle no more morally questionable than catching a fish; my own code interpreted killing a nesting turtle on a beach, or a tortoise on land, as the moral equivalent of assaulting or assassinating someone in a wheelchair.

But there was a common ground: we both wanted there to be turtles tomorrow...The broader realization was that, in a nation without wildlife patrols...turtle conservation should be in the hands of the Arawak people themselves, the user group who were obvious stakeholders in the restoration of the species...The process has had setbacks, and each season we have to reevaluate where the camp should be placed ...to provide protection to the greatest number of turtles. But when restraint comes as a request from a respected elder of the community rather than from a foreign visitor such as myself... (it) can have remarkable results."

And it has!

Finally, there are a few imperfections. I found the absence of an index irritating, especially for a book dealing with such a broad

selection of topics. Many of the photographs are of poor quality and others, irrelevant (e.g., a favorite automobile, with Miss America posing in front of the grill). A speech reprinted in one chapter (24) entitled "Fundamental Dilemmas of Life" tries to pinpoint the causes and failures of humanity to live in harmony with nature and come up with identifiable solutions. It rambles on and I found it disappointing, particularly from someone who has spent so many years contemplating the problem and who has developed such ingenious solutions for managing turtles. An obvious beginning, but one not discussed, is the need to curb our own population thereby relieving the pressures we exert on resources. At its conclusion we are left with the need to set aside "...primordial landscapes of Planet Earth...until mankind settles down somewhat." Is that really all we can (or should) do? I had hoped for a few more daring and insightful suggestions.

The reader is advised to keep his dictionary close by! This is an offering from a man of letters. You'll be running across a lot of words that will expand your vocabulary. (My personal favorite was "omniumgatherum").

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IUCN-SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group Quarterly Update

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MTSG Annual General Meeting

As has become the custom, the MTSG held its annual general meeting at the ISTS Annual Sea Turtle Symposium, this year held in Loreto, BCS, Mexico. The AGM was split into two sessions: In the first, Co-Chair Rod Mast presented a brief overview of key issues, including a summary of progress on Red Listing, followed by summaries by the Regional Vice-Chairs on pertinent MTSG-related activities in their respective regions. Notes from this session can be found at the MTSG website (www.iucn-mtsg.org). In a separate session, Co-Chair Nick Pilcher presented an overview of the Dhamra Port / MTSG relationship and led a discussion of the MTSG's involvement in that project. For readers who were not present in Loreto, we provide herein a synopsis of Nick's presentation, and an update on what has occurred in the ensuing months since the Annual General Meeting.

History of MTSG involvement at Dhamra. To understand the full history, one needs to see IUCN's larger picture involvement in industry relations. The IUCN Secretariat was asked by its members at the IUCN World Congress in Jordan in 2000 to develop a

framework for involving the private sector more in conservation activities. The Secretariat was given a mandate to develop Terms of Reference under which such engagements would be sanctioned as IUCN activities. At the 2004 Congress in Bangkok, the Terms of Reference were approved by the same membership and the IUCN Secretariat was tasked with implementing a business and biodiversity programme that engaged the private sector in a responsible manner, one which would build on IUCN's strengths and commitment to conservation.

So it was that in 2006, that the TATA Group approached IUCN for some assistance through the Asia Regional Office. At this point IUCN did not engage with the company immediately. A company audit was conducted of the TATA group by IUCN HQ, following which it was decided to engage in a dialogue to determine where things might lead. At this point the Asia Regional Office contacted the Chair of the SSC, who contacted The Co-Chairs of the MTSG. Rod was busy, so Nick went along to India on the first scoping mission. Contrary to what many readers may have heard, there was plenty of consultation between the Asia Regional Office and IUCN members in India, and Nick contacted members of our