

Development of the South Pacific Regional Marine Turtle Conservation and Management Program (RMTCP)

C Sylvia Spring

Present address: Marine & Coastal Section, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, Canberra, ACT

Previous address: Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Canberra, ACT

Introduction

In Australia six species of marine turtles are protected under Fisheries and Nature Conservation legislation both at the Commonwealth, State and Territory levels. Provisions exist which allow the traditional harvest of turtles for food and for traditional purposes but not for sale. In addition Australia has been a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1976 and all exports and imports of turtles/turtle products into and out of Australia are prohibited.

This situation leads many people to believe that Australian populations of marine turtles are secure and indeed at the moment they probably are. However available data from tag recapture programs indicate that Australian populations of green, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles migrate into South East Asian and South Pacific waters (See Fig. 1). Australia is aware that the conservation of Australian populations of marine turtles cannot be achieved solely at the national level and that regional efforts involving range countries are essential for the long term survival of marine turtles.

Of particular concern is the knowledge that both hawksbill and green turtle populations migrate to countries where they are harvested for subsistence and commercial purposes. There is a need to understand, quantify, manage and monitor these and other impacts, such as incidental catch, to enable the setting into place of effective long-term management and conservation strategies.

It was with this in mind and with knowledge of and active participation in existing regional mechanisms/forums that Australia was able to successfully support, along with other South Pacific nations, the development of a Regional Marine Turtle Conservation and Management Program under the direction of the South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP).

Development of the Regional Marine Turtle Conservation Program (RMTCP)

The Second Intergovernmental Meeting of SPREP in New Caledonia in 1988 endorsed a recommendation that " a project for the

coordination and integration of regional marine turtle management initiatives be developed which will focus on the promotion of field conservation activities, the development of supporting legislation and public awareness programs and the development of regional arrangements for marine turtle management ". The meeting further requested the UNEP representative to bring this resolution to the attention of the South East Asian Regional Seas Program with a view to seeking inter regional cooperation on this issue.

A Working Group was convened at the Fourth South Pacific Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas held in Vanuatu in 1989 to develop an outline for such a regional marine turtle program. As convenor of this Working Group, I was requested by SPREP to develop prior to the Conference, the first draft of the Regional Marine Turtle Management and Conservation Program (Spring 1989) which provided the basis for discussion in the Working Group.

The Working Group consisted of representatives from CITES, Greenpeace, TRAFFIC, the World Wildlife Fund, Australia (WWF) and country delegates from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Western Samoa, Fiji, Australia, and the Federated States of Micronesia.

The revised draft RMTCP document was tabled and accepted by the Fourth South Pacific Nature Conference which made the following recommendation " *this Conference adopts the regional marine turtle program for implementation within the framework of the SPREP; recommends that aid agencies provide funding and support for the implementation of the regional marine turtle program, recommends that the next Intergovernmental meeting of SPREP endorse the regional marine turtle program and urges that the UNEP East Asian Seas Program note the regional marine turtle program developed by this Conference with consideration given to the adoption of a similar program, and to interregional cooperation between SPREP and the East Asian Seas Region on the subject "*.

At the SPREP Steering Committee which met immediately following the Conference the RMTCP

was discussed in the context of the SPREP Work Program. The SPREP Steering Committee asked the SPREP Secretariat to include the RMTCP in the SPREP Work Program which enabled SPREP to immediately begin looking for extra budgetary funding for the RMTCP.

Objective of the RMTCP

The overall aim of the RMTCP is "to conserve marine turtles and their cultural, economic and nutritional values for the coastal peoples of the countries served by the SPREP".

Implicit in this carefully thought out aim is a recognition of the importance of turtles in the lives of the peoples of Pacific Island countries. The most common marine turtle species found in the region are green and hawksbill turtles which have been hunted for generations to provide the basic needs of traditional subsistence communities eg food, tools, decorations and items for trade.

By endorsing this aim, Australia recognises that the underlying philosophy of the RMTCP is to conserve marine turtles by monitoring and attempting to manage their use in a way that is ecologically sustainable rather than to promote the complete protection of marine turtles.

Elements of the RMTCP

In summary the RMTCP comprises the following elements: Information Gathering, Institution Building, Management/Research, Traditional Knowledge, Conservation Measures, Education/Publicity, International Efforts. For more detail see the RMTCP document which is appended to this paper (Attachment 1).

Implementation of the RMTCP

As set out in the RMTCP document (Attachment 1) SPREP convened a Steering Committee to plan the implementation of the RMTCP. The Steering Committee consisted of Ms S Spring ANPWS, Dr C Limpus QNPWS, Dr G Balazs USNMFS and representatives from Pacific Island countries likely to be involved in the implementation of the RMTCP.

The First Meeting of the Steering Committee was held in New Caledonia on 13-15 August 1990 and was attended by representatives from Australia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Palau. In addition observers from Greenpeace and TRAFFIC International attended the meeting.

The second meeting of the Steering Committee was held in New Caledonia on 12-14 August 1991, and was attended by representatives from participating countries, Marshall Islands, FSM, PNG, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Palau and French Polynesia. Recommendations from both meetings are at Attachment 2.

Funding of the RMTCP

SPREP has an agreement with the Canadian Government through the Canadian South Pacific Ocean Development Project of the International Centre for Ocean Development to undertake a joint project for the implementation of the RMTCP over a period of three years (1990-1992 inclusive). The total funding available was \$CAN 343,000 of which \$CAN 57,000 is for database development, \$CAN 180,000 for population survey and monitoring activities and \$CAN 30,000 for education activities.

In addition the Australian Government as part of its annual extra-budgetary contribution to SPREP committed \$50,000 towards the RMTCP for 1990 only.

Additional in-kind support for project activities under the RMTCP has been extended by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS), the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service (QNPWS), the US National Marine Fisheries Service and Greenpeace (SPREP 1991).

Australian Contribution to the RMTCP (In-kind)

In addition to the development of the draft RMTCP document, Australia has provided a convenor for the Special Marine Turtle Working Group at the Fourth South Pacific Conference, and specialist marine turtle advice to SPREP. Australia has also provided in-kind assistance through the ANPWS for the setting-up of a regional database at SPREP containing census information, tagging and capture information, migration information and legislation, utilisation and traditional information. A turtle bibliographic database has also been established with over 500 records to date.

Under this project two posters have been produced, one advertising for turtle tag return information and the other promoting marine turtle conservation (Geermans, 1992). Greenpeace (Australia) have produced a turtle identification poster for the RMTCP.

Conclusions

The commitment of Pacific Island countries to establish the RMTCP under SPREP was a significant breakthrough for marine turtle conservation in the Region. SPREP have done an admirable job in seeking and attracting funding for the first three years of the RMTCP. With this funding and with the in-kind assistance from a number of participating agencies, considerable progress has been made in the establishment of a regional database, generation of educational materials and the provision of funding and specialist advice and support for marine turtles surveys in participating South Pacific countries such as the Solomon Islands. However for these initial efforts to be of longer term benefit there is a need for the RMTCP to continue beyond the initial three years for which funds have been obtained.

It is hoped that the progress made in the first three years will provide the focus for attracting additional funding for the RMTCP. A matter which will require further consideration is the concept of a project coordinator for the RMTCP as originally envisaged under the RMTCP document. I believe that the appointment of a project

coordinator will be crucial to the long term success of the program and for the long term conservation of marine turtles in the South Pacific Region. Given the recorded migrations of marine turtles from Australian waters into the South Pacific and into South East Asian waters, the success of regional marine turtle conservation programs such as this one are crucial for the long-term conservation of marine turtles in Australian waters.

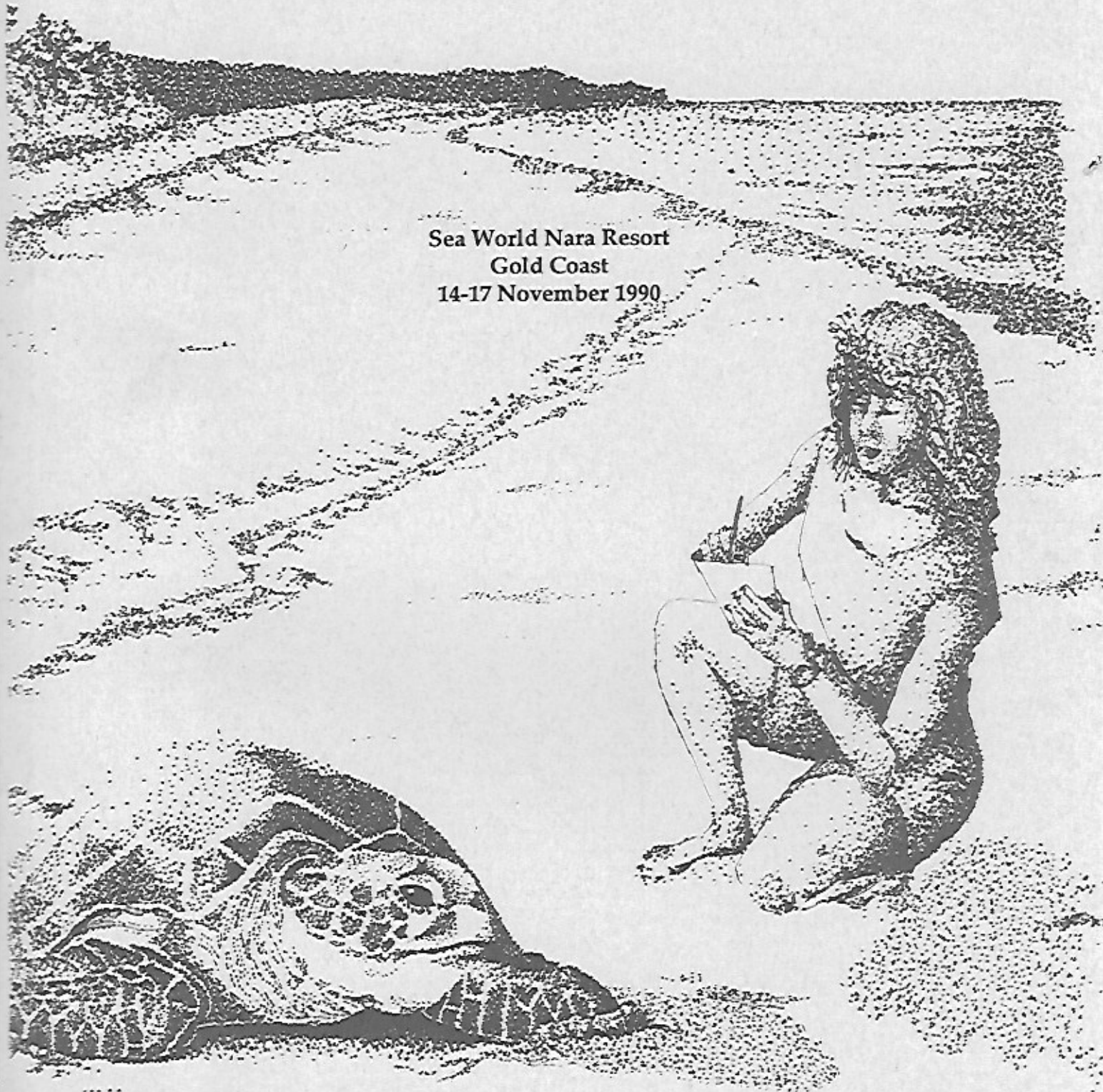
References

- Geermans, Suzanne H 1992. Summary of tasks undertaken for the RMTCP. Internal report to the ANPWS.
- SPREP, 1991. Report of the First Meeting and Workshop of the Regional Marine Turtle Conservation Programme, Noumea, New Caledonia, 13-15 August 1990.
- Spring, C. Sylvia 1989. A Regional Marine Turtle Conservation and Management Program. Information Paper 7, Fourth South Pacific Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas, Vanuatu, 4-12 September 1989.



Proceedings of the
AUSTRALIAN MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION WORKSHOP

Sea World Nara Resort
Gold Coast
14-17 November 1990



QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE
and
AUSTRALIAN NATURE CONSERVATION AGENCY