

SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION
AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME
STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING AND WORKSHOP
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 13-15 August 1990)

A REGIONAL MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME
FOR THE SOUTH PACIFIC REGION

Developed by the Marine Turtle Working Group
at the Fourth South Pacific Conference
on Nature Conservation
and Protected Areas
(Port Vila, Vanuatu, 4-12 September 1989)
and adopted by that Conference

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Convenor.

INTRODUCTION

It is now generally accepted that the conservation of migratory species such as marine turtles cannot be achieved solely by conservation measures at the national level. International and/ or regional co-operative efforts that involve 'range' countries are necessary to ensure the long term survival of marine turtles and other migratory animals. In recognition of this situation and the importance of marine turtles as a cultural and subsistence resource of the peoples of the South Pacific, the second Intergovernmental Meeting of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) which was held in Noumea, New Caledonia, 27 June - 1 July 1988, endorsed the recommendation 'that a project for the co-ordination 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 education programmes and the development of regional arrangements for marine turtle management.'

The meeting further requested the representative of UNEP, which is the Secretariat of the Action Plan for the Protection and the Development of the East Asian Seas Region, to bring the problem of marine turtle management to the attention of the forthcoming Intergovernmental Meeting convened under that Action Plan with a view to seeking inter-regional co-operation between SPREP and the East Asian Seas Region on the subject.

To implement the recommendation SPREP sought the assistance of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service with the development of a draft regional programme for consideration by a special purpose working group at the Fourth South Pacific Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas. Utilizing assistance from the CITES Secretariat for the conference, a number of people with regional experience in aspects of turtle conservation, management and research were drawn together to finalize the proposed programme, which was subsequently endorsed for inclusion in the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation in the South Pacific region adopted by the Conference.

A phased work programme will be developed for the overall programme and funding support for its implementation will be sought from appropriate international conservation and development assistance agencies. The overall implementation of this programme will be co-ordinated by SPREP. It must be recognized that the success of the programme will also require the co-operation and support of the member countries of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme and other regional and international institutions as well as SPREP. Of particular importance is the support and involvement of the many national and regional marine resource management agencies either located or working within the South Pacific region.

SPECIES OCCURRENCE AND DISTRIBUTION

Six of the seven species of marine turtles found in the world today are found in the South Pacific Region. They are the Green turtle *Chelonia mydas*, the Hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*, the Loggerhead turtle *Caretta caretta*, the Olive or Pacific Ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea*, the Flatback turtle *Chelonia depressa* and the Leatherback turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*. Of these, the flatback turtle has a very restricted distribution in northern Australian and southern Papua New Guinean waters. The distribution of the remaining five species of marine turtles in the South Pacific region is shown in Table 1.

The most abundant, widespread and migratory marine turtles in the South Pacific region are the green and hawksbill turtles. Although the loggerhead turtle appears to be less widespread and abundant than the green and the hawksbill, tag recoveries indicate that Australian nesting loggerheads migrate to feeding grounds in Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia.

Tag recoveries from existing mark-recapture programmes (Figure 1) provide an indication of the movements of marine turtles throughout the South Pacific region. More intensive tagging programmes throughout the South Pacific region will provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture of marine turtle movements.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF MARINE TURTLES TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC PEOPLES

In areas where they are abundant, green and hawksbill turtles have been hunted for centuries to supply the basic needs of the traditional subsistence village community e.g. food, tools, decoration and items for trade. Hunting practices which have evolved over many years represent the oral knowledge of the village relating to the turtle, where it lives, its habits and the most efficient ways of hunting it. The complex social interactions involved in observing the many rules, rituals and traditional ownership patterns contribute to make the hunt an organized and disciplined affair and the consumption of turtles a special social event in the village. Where they occur, these traditional patterns of capture and consumption have helped to regulate the exploitation of marine turtles.

PRESSURES ON MARINE TURTLE POPULATIONS

In many areas in the South Pacific today, easier access to natural resources and the increasing trend to sell marine turtles for cash in town markets has resulted in many situations where turtle exploitation is unregulated. If unchecked the depletion and possible disappearance of the resource and its economic, social and cultural values could occur. However, if wisely managed, it should be possible to combine conservation goals with sustainable levels of harvest of marine turtles for the benefit of the present and future generations.

The IUCN Red Data Book lists the green and hawksbill turtles as endangered. The primary cause of decline in green turtle populations is the systematic commercial exploitation of eggs and adults. While the green turtle has been traditionally used as a food source, the introduction of cash economies, access to improved technology and the increase in human populations are factors which could raise subsistence harvests to levels which are no longer sustainable. The primary cause for the widespread depletion of hawksbill turtles is the commercial trade in raw tortoiseshell and tortoiseshell products.

OVERALL AIM OF THE PROPOSED REGIONAL MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

The overall aim of the proposed Regional Marine Turtle Conservation and Management Programme is:

To conserve marine turtles and their cultural, economic and nutritional values for the coastal peoples of the countries served by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).

OBJECTIVES

The Regional Programme has the following objectives:

1. Implementation

1.1 To implement the Programme by:

- a) seeking the agreement and support of the SPREP Member countries and action by the governments and peoples of the region for an integrated long-term programme to conserve marine turtles, and
- b) establishing a Project Team Leader and a Project Team based in the South Pacific to implement the objectives of this programme.

To be achieved by this Conference:

- a) endorsing the Regional Marine Turtle Conservation and Management Programme, and its adoption as an element of the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation in the South Pacific region, and
- b) recommending the inclusion of the programme into the SPREP Work Programme.

2. Information

2.1 To develop a regional database for marine turtles.

To be achieved by the establishment and maintenance of an ongoing regional database and information network for marine turtles. This database should include existing databases on marine turtles, if relevant to the region (e.g. database held at the World Conservation Monitoring Centre).

2.2 To review all previous work carried out on marine turtles in the region with the aim of identifying the current status of research and management efforts in the region.

To be achieved by contracting a consultant (consultants) to carry out a literature search of published and unpublished material, reports and articles, and to interview government agencies and marine turtle researchers who have worked/are working in the South Pacific region. This information to be included into the regional database.

2.3 To contact government agencies within the region with the responsibility for the management and/or conservation of marine turtles with the aim of:

- a) identifying existing legislation, protected areas and enforcement mechanisms relating to marine turtles in the region, and
- b) determining existing gaps in management coverage.

To be achieved by contracting a consultant to collect the information required, and identifying priorities for action. This information to be included in the regional database.

3. Institution Building

- 3.1 To assist countries, where necessary, to develop appropriate legal, policy and administrative measures for the preparation and implementation of national marine turtle conservation and management programmes.

To be achieved by regional/international funding agencies making specific grants to governments to assist them to establish adequately staffed and funded long-term programmes which are consistent with the regional priorities for the continued survival of the marine turtle resource in the region.

- 3.2 To provide training and education opportunities for appropriate personnel involved with marine turtle conservation in the region, as requested by governments.

To be achieved by co-ordinating a regional training programme involving institutions, local community groups (e.g. NGO's, traditional landowners) and government agencies.

4. Management Related Research

- 4.1 To gather reliable data on the population status and distribution of marine turtle species occurring in the region.

To be achieved by:

- a) the establishment of a series of baseline survey sites in countries and along important migratory paths throughout the region,
- b) the encouragement, financial support and regional coordination of tagging programmes including standardization of tags, centralization of return address, publicity and record keeping; and
- c) the identification of genetically discrete populations of marine turtles in the region.

- 4.2 To encourage continuing research on all aspects of sea turtle biology (e.g. growth rates, life histories, population dynamics, mortality rates); management techniques, and the socio-economic, cultural and nutritional values of marine turtles for traditional communities.

To be achieved by seeking the co-operation of funding agencies to give greater priority to funding research on marine turtles and on the development of effective management techniques for the conservation of marine turtles, both within and outside the region.

- 4.3 To investigate ways of obtaining information on marine turtle activity in isolated areas.

To be achieved by:

- a) investigating existing resource surveillance activities such as overflights, coast watching, and fishery patrol vessels, by evaluating the potential for integrating surveillance of key turtle habitats in isolated areas into these activities, and
- b) by recommending implementation measures to relevant government agencies.

5. Traditional Knowledge

- 5.1 To encourage the development and implementation of national programmes to document traditional knowledge and the socio-economic importance of the hunting and consumption of marine turtles.

To be achieved by regional and national agencies undertaking marine turtle projects within countries to collect this information using cost-effective means (e.g. questionnaires and postal surveys such as those developed by Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu).

- 5.2 To promote the inclusion of relevant traditional ecological knowledge in conservation and management strategies for marine turtles.

To be achieved by encouraging governments to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge, established rights and traditional tenure systems into the design of marine turtle conservation and management programmes.

- 5.3 To promote the involvement of traditional landowners and traditional resource users in the management of the marine turtle resource.

To be achieved by facilitating joint participation in management decisions by government authorities, traditional landowners and traditional resource users.

- 5.4 To encourage the incorporation of appropriate traditional ecological information relating to marine turtles into curricula and educational activities for schools.

To be achieved by encouraging educational institutions to design projects relating to traditional information on marine turtles, and encouraging close liaison between conservation agencies and education institutions in designing curricula.

6. Conservation Measures

- 6.1 To identify important breeding and feeding sites and encourage countries to protect and manage these sites.

To be achieved by the Project Team Leader and in consultation with the Project Leader Team developing a list of critical and key habitats (both terrestrial and marine) for marine turtle populations within the region and encouraging countries through the provision of technical expertise and/or financial assistance, to prepare and implement plans for the protection and management of these habitats, in consultation with traditional landowners.

- 6.2 To develop applicable guidelines for the management of turtle harvesting for incorporation into national marine turtle legislation.

To be achieved by encouraging and supporting countries to:

- a) survey turtle nesting sites and to monitor all forms of impact including traditional/subsistence harvesting, local/national/regional/international levels of commercial exploitation; incidental catch through fisheries interactions and the impact of pollution or habitat degradation (both terrestrial and marine);
- b) identify trends and to set realistic guidelines for traditional utilization, and
- c) encourage countries to take where necessary specific action to reduce or minimize these impacts.

7. Conservation Education/Publicity Programmes

- 7.1 To develop an education programme promoting the conservation of marine turtles in the region.

To be achieved by the Project Team Leader and in consultation with the Project Team co-ordinating the implementation of a regional education programme on marine turtle conservation, and assisting individual countries in the production and translation of various educational materials into local languages.

- 7.2 To promote community involvement by non government conservation groups, church groups etc. in development of local or community projects involving marine turtles (e.g. nest protection, recording traditional uses for turtles); and for the distribution of educational material to local communities.

To be achieved by the Project Team Leader and in consultation with the Project Team co-ordinating in consultation with government agencies, a programme of community involvement through the provision of technical and/or financial assistance and educational materials to community groups.

8. International Efforts

- 8.1 To encourage countries to accede to international and regional species conservation agreements (especially CITES) and to review the need for specific provisions relating to marine turtle conservation in regional agreements.

To be achieved by the provision of technical expertise and financial assistance to enable countries to establish administrative procedures required to accede to and implement international agreements.

- 8.2 To participate in international efforts promoting the conservation, management and wise use of marine turtles.

To be achieved by the regional programme linking in with marine turtle programmes in other regions through liaison with the IUCN/SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group, the UNEP East Asian Seas Programme, the IUCN/WWF TRAFFIC Network and other non-government organizations.

- 8.3 To encourage the exchange of information and development of joint conservation programmes between "range" countries within the region.

To be achieved by those countries entering into bilateral/multilateral agreements to establish the framework for the development of long-term management and conservation strategies for shared marine resources.

Table 1. Distribution of Feeding and Nesting Populations
of Marine Turtles in the South Pacific Region

	Green	Hawksbill	Loggerhead	O/Ridley	Leatherback
Australia	N/F	N/F	N/F		
Cook Islands	N	N*			
Federated States of Micronesia	N/F	N/F*			
Fiji	N/F*	N/F*			
French Polynesia	N/F*	*			
Kiribati	N/F	F			
Marshall Islands	N/F*	N*			
New Caledonia	N/F	LN	N/F		
Northern Mariana Islands	F	F			
Palau	N/F	N/F			
Papua New Guinea	N/F	N/F	LN/F	LN/F	N
Solomon Islands	LN/F	N/F			N
Tonga	N/F	LN*			N
Tuvalu	N/F*	F*			
Vanuatu	N/F*	N/F*			

- * denotes little information available
N denotes nesting population
F denotes feeding population

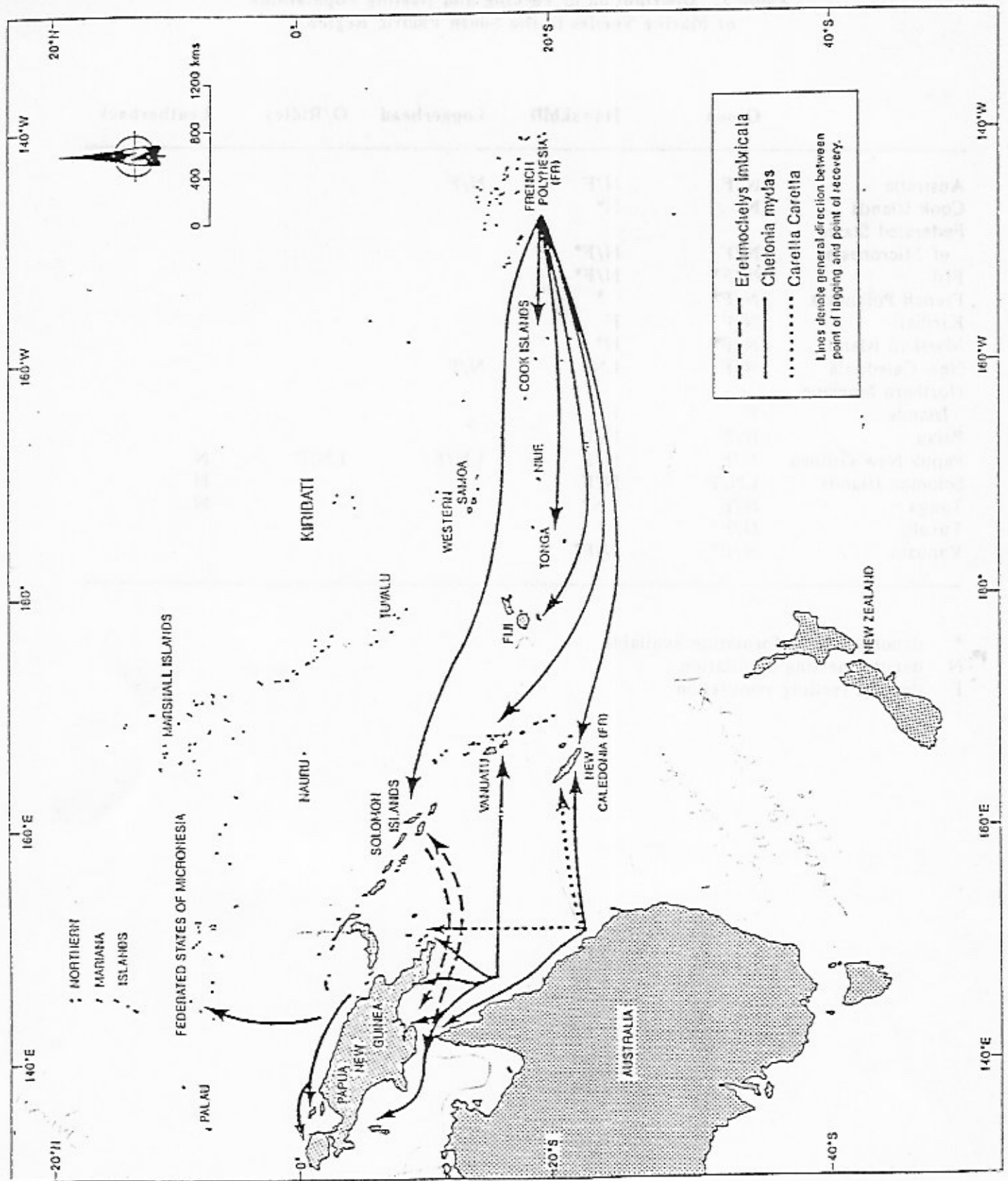


Figure 1: Marine Turtle Migrations in the South Pacific Region.

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