

"No sir, you don't have to worry about that," said Leroy. "That's instinct there. Them turtles was born wild, and they'll die wild. That little stint they did in your tanks didn't mean nothing! You see the way they went? They headed right for that deep-water channel just like them other turtles did. All them turtles follow those guts and channels, they can find deep water anytime they want to."

"Look, there's one out there right next to that second channel marker," cried Alex excitedly. "I just saw his head pop up."

"That's all right," scoffed Tommy. "Since you like them turtles so good, I'll bring you their shells in a few days. I'll probably find them hanging around my crab traps directly, trying to steal my crabs."

Tommy was beginning to get on my nerves. "I know this won't bother you, but ridleys are becoming extinct."

"Extinct!" cried Tommy. "Are you kidding? There's millions of goddamn ridleys out there. You ought to see all the heads popping up around my crab traps, the little crab-stealing bastards."

Leroy spat a plug of tobacco into the sea. "I'll have to agree with Tommy on that, Jack. I can't believe ridleys are going extinct. I'm sixty years old, and I've been on this bay all my life. I've seen turtles come and go. We used to fish turtles a lot when I was a boy, and I remember long periods when you wouldn't hardly see no turtles a-tall. I don't know where they were, maybe way off yonder somewhere, but from Steinhatchee to Cedar Key there were times you couldn't hardly catch a turtle. That was before you were born, but if you'd of lived down here back then, you'd of thought they was extinct. But they weren't."

"A turtle ain't no different than any other kind of seafood," Alex joined in. "They're just like pompano. Some years there's a heap of 'em in here and we make damn good money fishing, and the next year they're gone. The same thing is true for shrimp and crabs. Like this year, thank the Good Lord, we had a fine run of crabs. Folks is buying new cars, getting out of debt, and going back into it. But hell, next year it might not be so good,

and the year after we'll all be starving to death. Now if you ask me, it's the same way with turtles."

I could understand how Alex could feel that way. If you work around the water long enough, you become accustomed to seeing huge fluctuations in populations of marine life. One year the jellyfish will explode, the next the water will be massed over with uncountable billions of threadfins or sea hares. But I knew that short-lived invertebrates like penaeid shrimp or blue crabs were not the same thing as a sea turtle with its long life and slow rate of growth.

"Well, you got a point there," agreed Alex, after I told him all this. "I've always heard that a turtle is as old as the world. Daddy said that some of them gets to live to be a thousand years old!"

"That's not true," I said. "But no one really knows how long a turtle can live. I think the oldest documented record is a hundred and fifty years for a big tortoise, but they've kept loggerheads for thirty-five years in a London aquarium. They'd probably live to be a hundred in the wild, if people would let them alone!"

Tommy squinted at me through his cold blue eyes. "Jack, I want to ask you something, and I ain't being smart about it neither. Let's just say for argument's sake that you're right, the ridley is becoming extinct. Tell me something. If every damn one of them crab-trap-stealing bastards disappeared from the world tomorrow, what difference would it make?"

I was stunned for a moment. I had never really contemplated it. Tommy wanted hard answers. He wanted to know what the impact would be on the world, and I couldn't reply because I didn't have sufficient information on the life cycles of marine life and the natural history of ridleys to draw upon.

"Well, sea turtles eat a lot of jellyfish, and you know what a nightmare they can be when they get in a net."

"Shoot, you can't make me believe that if there were five hundred times the number of turtles in the world than there are today there'd be any less jellyfish," Tommy scoffed. "There's a



billion tons of jelly out there, and always has been."

"Well, now, I don't know," said Leroy thoughtfully. "Jack might have a point. Seems to me that there's a heap more can-noballs out there than when I was a boy growing up. I damn sure don't remember them coming in like they are. I don't know of nothing else that eats them. But what I think would hurt if they'd become extinct is that a lot of poor folks wouldn't have no more turtles to eat. Fact is, back in the Hoover days, turtle meat and turtle eggs kept many a family fed around here. When us boys would catch a green turtle or a ridley, we'd take him home and make steaks out of him. We was raised on turtle meat down in Cedar Key. They was to us what hamburger meat and pork chops is to most people nowadays."

"Yeah, I'll give you that," said Tommy grudgingly, "but if there weren't no more turtles I don't think it would make a bit of difference to most folks. There's lots of things you can't get to eat in the world no more 'cause it's scarce, and there's still plenty of food on the table. There ain't no shortage of chickens, cows, and hogs, so it wouldn't make all *that* much difference."

I hauled out the tired old arguments and devices that desperate biologists use when they're trying to argue for the survival of any species. At least the turtle *was* good to eat. I was in far better shape than a herpetologist: friend of mine who was trying to stop the paper companies from clear-cutting a forest where a rare endemic tree frog lived in west Florida. Or what about cave salamanders, or pup fishes that live in tiny restricted habitats? For that matter, what about the cheetah on the plains of Africa, the woolly rhinoceros of India? Who knows what imbalances will be caused when these creatures finally disappear.

For all we knew the Kemp's ridley was a biochemical store-house waiting to be tapped. Perhaps it could produce a serum that could indeed cure cancer, stop heart disease, and prolong human life on our already overcrowded, overpopulated planet.

"Well now, Tommy," said Leroy after he listened to all my arguments, "I'll tell you why the ridley shouldn't become extinct. The Good Lord put that ridley on this earth. He put the

animals and the birds and everything else. I don't think He meant to have them all killed off. The Bible says that the animals will die off just before the world comes to an end, and if you ask me, that's just what's fixing to happen."