



Marine turtles in the Manus Province : a study of the social, cultural and economic implications of the traditional exploitation of marine turtles in the Manus Province of Papua

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La pêche traditionnelle en Océanie



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Marine turtles in the Manus Province

A study of the social, cultural and economic implications of the traditional exploitation of marine turtles in the Manus Province of Papua New Guinea

by

Sylvia SPRING*

INTRODUCTION.

Manus is the smallest and most isolated province of Papua New Guinea. It is essentially a maritime province of 8,000 square miles in area, of which only 800 square miles is land. There are over 160 islands divided into two main groups: the Admiralty Islands in the east and the Western Islands. The largest of the Admiralty Islands is Manus, to the east lie Nauna, Pak and Tong Islands, to the south-east are the Hornos Islands – Patuam, Malai, Bundro and Rambutyo. South of Manus is Lou, Baluan, the Johnston Islands, M'buke, Long and Pig Islands. The Purdy Islands, Rat, Bat, Mouse and Mole, lie 60 miles south-west and due west are Bipi and the Sabben Islands.

The Western Islands consist of two main archipelagos, the Hermit Islands and the Ninigo Group, consisting of seven atolls. Aua and Wuvulu lie to the extreme west of the Province with the Sae Islands, and the Kaniet (Anchorites) Islands to the extreme north of the Province.

The people of the Admiralty Islands are ethnologically classed as Melanesians, while the people of the Ninigo, Hermit, Wuvulu and Aua Islands are Micronesians. (Ryan, 1972).

Travel around the Manus Province is largely restricted to travel by sea, which is in turn restricted by the prevailing winds. The North-West wind blows from November to

March, while the South-East wind blows from May to October. The doldrums which are the best times to travel, occur in the intervals.

METHODS.

The information presented in this paper has been collected from responses to a postal survey carried out in 1976, and from village interviews conducted in October 1977, July 1978 and October 1979.

RESULTS.

There are five species of marine turtles identified with a vernacular name from the various localities in the Manus Province.

Turtles have been hunted for centuries in Papua New Guinea, supplying some of the basic needs of the subsistence village society: food, tools, decoration, and items of trade.

In the Manus Province, turtles are an essential foodstuff in the village, not for everyday consumption but for consumption during special occasions. Turtles are eaten during feasts for every social event of any consequence in the village, such as bride price repayment, funeral feasts, building of a new haus boi, gift exchange. Green turtles *Chelonia mydas* and the occasional Hawksbill *Eretmochelys imbricata* are eaten. Most villagers report Hawks-

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TABLE 1 : VERNACULAR NAMES OF MARINE TURTLE SPECIES IN THE MANUS PROVINCE.

	GREEN	HAWKSBILL	LEATHERBACK	LOGGERHEAD	OLIVE RIDLEY
AHUS ISLAND	pawa	kareng	puniriu	---	pimbat
ANDRA ISLAND	pawa				
MANUS ISLAND, TULU VILLAGE	pawa	kareng	poleleu	---	---
PONAM ISLAND	pawa	keheng	piwiriu	---	---
* SALIEN VILLAGE	pawa	cahe	puitiu	muah	---
HARENGAN ISLAND	boibawa				
BIPI ISLAND	pawach	kachek	pitiu	---	---
PAK ISLAND	loquis	keheng	kalpuit		paroul
TONG ISLAND	karav	keheng	kalipitch	---	---
* RAMBUTYO ISLAND	changine	kareng	kalipeach	bowomon	---
* TIMONAI VILLAGE	changine	kareng	kalipeach	---	---
* PERE VILLAGE	changine	kareng	kalipeach	---	---
* BALUAN ISLAND	changine	kareng	kalipeach	buamoin	---
LOU ISLAND	nik	kareng	alimpus	---	---
HERMIT ISLANDS					
LUF ISLAND	hon	masang	ahoulam	puamoan	---
NINIGO ISLANDS					
LAU ISLAND	hon	masang	ahoulam	puamoan	---
PIHON ISLAND	hon	masang	ahoulam	---	---
AMIK ISLAND	hon	masang	ahoulam	---	---
WUVULU ISLAND	alaba	matani	---	---	---

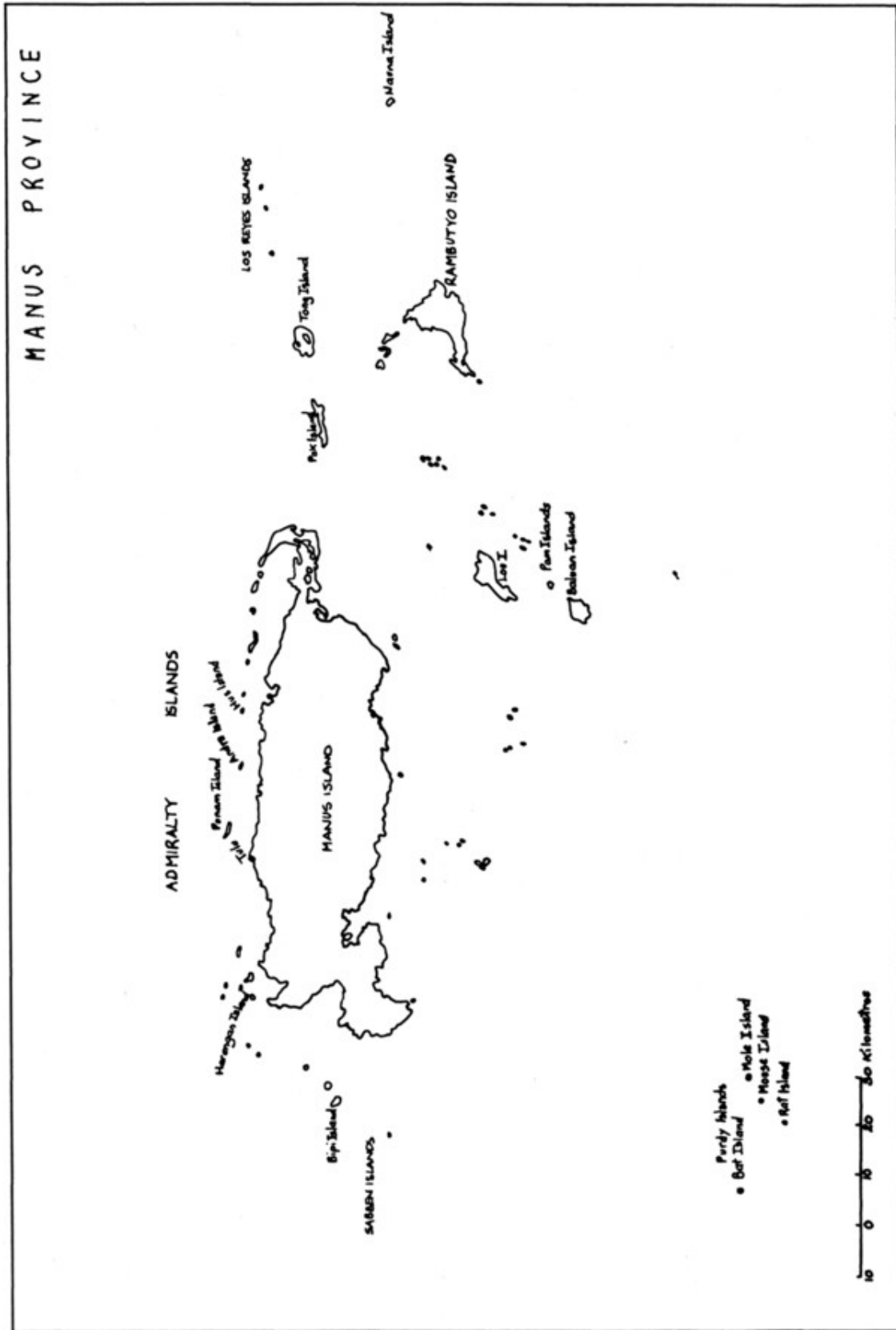
* From Brydget Hudson, personal communication.

bills as "good to eat". Pak Islanders, however, do recognize that Hawksbills can be potentially poisonous, and villagers avoid catching lethargic Hawksbills as they believe them to be toxic (Pritchard, 1979).

Hawksbills were also hunted for their "tor-toiseshell" which was used to make a variety of items both ornamental (bracelets, earrings, rings, headbands for dancing) and useful (spoons, combs, fishhooks). Hawksbill scutes stacked together and flicked like a pack of cards were used as a musical accompaniment

to dancing. Hawksbill shells were also previously sold to Europeans and Japanese for up to K20 for a fine shell. However, with the present export regulations, there is little demand for Hawksbill carapaces.

There are some areas in the Manus Province which have converted to the Seventh Day Adventist faith and have abandoned eating turtle meat. These areas are the Hermit Islands, half of the Ninigo Islands and Lou Island, Wuvulu and Tong Islands.



HUNTING OF TURTLES.

When an occasion arose and turtles were needed for a feast, it was not simply a case of the host going out and catching as many turtles as he required. There were and still are many rituals involved in the hunting of turtles in the Manus Province.

These traditional hunting practices have evolved over the years and present the villages' accumulated oral knowledge of the biology of the turtle and ways to hunt it.

Firstly, permission must be sought from certain persons or leaders who own the right to hunt turtles within the traditional hunting reefs of the village. Traditional reef ownership is widespread in the Admiralty Islands. Reefs are traditionally owned by individual villages or village groups and, within the villages, the rights to fish various parts of the reef and to use various fishing techniques and to catch various species of animals is owned by certain clans or leaders of clans. (Carrier, 1980; Spring, 1981; Johannes, 1981). This pattern of traditional reef ownership does not occur in the Western Islands. The Western Islanders believe that the sea belongs to all men. (Spring, 1981). Once permission has been received to hunt turtles, a date is then set for the hunt and turtle hunters prepare themselves and their families for this day.

Traditionally, turtles were caught either by hand (Bipi Island, Western Islands) or by using a turtle net (Ahus, Andra, Ponam and Harengan Islands). There were many tambus and rituals surrounding these traditional hunting practices, e.g., in Bipi Island, prior to the turtle hunt, a special feast known as *mbulukal* is held to appease ancestors of the turtle islands. Turtles are no longer traditionally caught by hand; however, the turtle net is still occasionally used, along with its attendant tambus and rituals. The turtle net (or *umben/kapet*) was made from bush materials and the art of making the net belonged to certain families. This knowledge was passed down within these families. Today, this knowledge has died out in many villages and nets have fallen into disrepair. There are several nets still in existence on Ahus, Andra and Ponam Islands. (Spring, 1980b).

On Ponam Island, the turtle net is regarded as a sacred object and is looked after by a magic man, who is also a leader of the net. This net is only used on very special occasions. The last time it was used on Ponam

was for the Independence Celebrations in 1975. The following interview was held with Sale Selef, the magic man who looks after the net on Ponam Island :

"The two elders of the turtles are called Kiribom and Kiyō. Kiribom is the leader of the right side of the net and Kiyō is the leader of the left side. When a turtle is needed, the people concerned come to the two leaders and discuss their needs. The two leaders confer and a date is set for the net to be cast. Twenty-four men are needed to cast the net, twelve men for each side. On the day of the hunt, the canoes are gathered together and supplies (tobacco, coconut, betel nut) are placed inside them. There are ten canoes – two large ones, and eight smaller ones. The net is weighted with stones and carried on the two large canoes. We paddle until we come across a channel and we wait there until a turtle is spotted and then the net is cast. As the net is cast, some men leap into the water and when the turtle is caught in the net, they all yell *AIII*. Then the two large canoes converge and the turtle is picked up by the smaller canoes. As each turtle is caught, a *tabut* is blown. The first turtle caught is mine as I am the elder of the two leaders.

I have an ancient *garamut* that used to belong to my ancestors when they were eating men. I have it here today and I put oil in it and some leaf, the kind my ancestors used, and sing a song to the turtle saying – 'wherever you have come from you will not return'. During the hunt we observe total silence, the only man allowed to talk is myself. We move from passage to passage catching turtles, until I observe the time to go back to the village.

We go back with me leading; the hunting party lands on the beach. The leader of the left side and I, lead with our *garamuts* and our sticks and we go into our houses and the canoes are pulled onto the beach. Only then are the women allowed to come to the beach with our food. There is a strict *tambu* against women and children touching the turtles. A special group of men (organised beforehand) carry the turtles to a *bani* built in the sea. They are responsible for feeding the turtles until they are required for the feast.

In a few places in the Manus Province, nesting females were traditionally taken. There is a practice of calculating or 'divining' when a nesting turtle will return to lay her next clutch of eggs. (Tulu Village, Bipi Village, Pak Island, Ninigo Islands).

From Kupe Pakrokai, Bipi Village :

During the nesting season, people go to the Sabben Islands in search of eggs. When the eggs are dug out they are counted. Customarily, for every 100 eggs, 10 small sticks known as *niaket* must be collected. If there are 200 eggs, 20 *niaket* are needed. These *niaket* are used to determine



the second coming of the mother turtle using the daily counting system. The person who collected the eggs must report to the owner of the island and brief him on his findings. If that person then wishes to collect the mother turtle for some purpose, he has to obtain permission. Each day a *niaket* is counted and thrown away. This is done every day until there are only three *niaket* left. The egg collector then returns to the island and waits for the turtle to return.

(Spring, 1980a).

This is also practised at Tulu Village on Manus Island. There is a small black sand beach with a deep water approach in front of Tulu Village. Leatherbacks *Dermochelys coriacea* nest here. A magic man at Tulu Village, by cooking up a mixture of coconut oil, dogs' teeth and sago and chanting over the plate, can 'divine' when a Leatherback will come and nest. (Pritchard, 1979).

Nesting Leatherbacks are lured to the fire by a light or lamp held to its eyes, and then clubbed to death. There is strict distribution of meat among the two clans who "own" the nesting Leatherbacks and for the rest of the village. This is unfortunately a case where traditional ritual is wiping out a resource instead of regulating its harvest. The people estimate that there are about nine nestings in an average year; however, nearly all nesting females are killed and eaten. In 1978, only four turtles nested; one was killed and three nests were dug up. (Pritchard, 1979). In 1979, only two nested, and both were eaten and their nests dug up.

The most widespread method of catching turtles in the Manus Province today is harpooning. This method was taught to villagers by Japanese trochus fishermen in the 1930s. There are little or no traditional rules or rituals associated with this method of catching turtles. The harpoon is made of wood or steel; it has a detachable spear tip made from a 3-cornered file. This spear tip is attached to a wooden float or *perei* by a strong rope. When a turtle is speared either from a canoe or by a swimmer in the water, the harpoon detaches, leaving the spear tip embedded in the turtle shell. The turtle is allowed to run until it is exhausted, and then it is picked up by the canoe. (Spring, 1980b).

CONSUMPTION OF TURTLES.

Once turtles are caught, they are usually kept alive in a "*hanis*" or a pen built in the

sea, until the feast day arrives. They are fed chopped clams, seagrasses and pipis. When all preparations have been made for the feast, the turtles are killed, usually by a blow to the head or by cutting the throat. All the blood is carefully saved for the cooking pot. The turtle is either given a quick roast and then cut up; or simply cut up and boiled with the blood and some green vegetables.

For different feasts, there are different rules of behaviour but in all, the turtle is an important animal, not only as food for the feasts, but also for giving as gifts to participants in the feasts. During the *lapan*, for example, food is distributed amongst the participants: turtles are given to inland people and in exchange, inland people give garden vegetables and sago to the island people. The *lapan* is the biggest feast of all, and the quantities of food involved are enormous – for example, 500 sacks of sago, 60 large turtles. Food shared in this way satisfies mutual obligations, adds to the giver's personal prestige, and ensures a more even distribution of protein and vegetables. Islanders rely heavily on the sea for protein, but their gardens are usually very poor. Therefore, they rely on exchanges with inland people for their sacc, taro and green vegetables.

These days money is replacing the bartering system and so garden produce is being sold in markets. Island people now sell their resources in order to buy their vegetables. A few small turtles are sold in Lorengau market and to the High School, but mainly fish is sold for money. Therefore, the *lapan* and all its cultural rituals is disappearing.

In the Western Islands, there are no restrictions on people killing turtles: anyone can hunt turtles. However, there are some superstitious restrictions attached to hunting of turtles and the distribution of meat. For example, women cannot sweep the village until the men return from the sea; menstruating or pregnant women cannot go near the hunters prior to the hunt: if a man's wife is pregnant he cannot participate in the hunt.

Turtle meat was also used as an insurance against illness in the village: a feast is held, turtles are killed and cut up into small pieces and the meat is distributed among all the *maselai* of various villages. People believe these *maselai* have the power to heal sick people. If anyone from these villages at some future date gets sick, the people call on the *masalai* to help cure the sick person as a repayment for their share of the feast. A si-

milar practice occurs in Palau where people believe that turtle meat offered to a particular spirit could restore the sick person to good health (Office of the Staff Anthropologist, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, 1961).

For people who belong to a totemic group, with the turtle as its totem, it is tambu to eat turtles or come in contact with cooking pots, utensils and plates which have recently been used to eat turtle meat. If this tambu is broken, it results in sickness which could end in death.

DISCUSSION.

Sea Turtles have been hunted for centuries to provide basic needs of the village. The Green turtle is abundant, full of flavour, and is a high quality protein food. They are so numerous and sustaining that they have become a central element in the subsistence culture of the Manus village. Not only are they nutritionally important, but a whole network of social interaction has evolved around the capture and consumption of turtles over the years. Turtles are also important in economic exchanges, within traditional trade networks. These traditional patterns of capture and consumption have helped regulate the exploitation of the sea turtle resource. The many and varied social rules and rituals help make the turtle hunt an organised and disciplined affair. Some are based on superstitious beliefs – especially the ones relating to women – but all serve to make the capture of turtles and the subsequent feast a special event in the village.

These days, traditional practices are coming under a lot of pressure from the rapidly changing social environment. Old traditions are being discarded to allow for an easier access to natural resources. We have seen that old turtle hunting methods (netting, catching by hand) with all their attendant tambus and rituals, have been largely replaced by harpooning. At present, turtles are still being consumed in traditional feasts and are not as yet being commercially exploited for sale in town markets as has happened around Port Moresby. It may be that the traditional links that the Manus people have with turtles could

save turtles from the increasingly evident trend in Papua New Guinea to sell resources for cash. Should this happen, the turtle population would be rapidly overhunted, providing only short-term benefits. In the long-term, the disappearance of the turtle resource would result in a significant nutritional and cultural deprivation for the Manus people.

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article l'auteur procède à une étude sur les implications socio-culturelles et économiques de l'exploitation traditionnelle des tortues marines dans la Province de Manus en Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée. L'auteur conclut que le statut privilégié de cette espèce au sein de la tradition les protège d'un processus de surpêche.

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