



# TALKIN' TURTLES

## CHARLOTTE KASSIS '25 TRAVELS TO SPEAK AT INTERNATIONAL SEA TURTLE SYMPOSIUM IN GHANA

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Earlier this year, senior Charlotte Kassis traveled to Ghana for the International Sea Turtle Symposium—an experience that proved to be far more than just an academic trip. From giving her first oral presentation on sea turtle research to visiting sacred cultural sites and wildlife sanctuaries, Charlotte's journey was a powerful blend of science, history, and personal growth. In this Q&A, she reflects on her time abroad, what she learned, and how the experience changed the way she sees conservation, collaboration, and the world.

**Q: What was the purpose of your trip?**

I was in Ghana, specifically the city of Accra, for a conference on sea turtle research and conservation. The conference was called the International Sea Turtle Symposium, which is hosted by the International Sea Turtle Society. Because I started my research/capstone project in January of last year, I was able to have a working abstract, which I could submit in October. I applied for either a poster presentation or an oral presentation, and left the choice up to the people in charge. I got in and was told to give an oral presentation.

**Q: What did you do on your trip?**

I flew to Accra like five (I think) days before the conference started, and along with my mother, Ms. Jim, and I took a plane to the north, to the city of Tamale, and then with a tour guide drove to Mole National Park. In Tamale, before driving over, we visited a tanner's house, who treated, dried, and stained/colored the hide of goats, and other animals. A lot of the leather was turned into sandals (my mother bought a pair). He used a variety of ash water concentrations to help remove the fur, and metals/dried corn husks to color the leather. At Mole National Park, we spent four days there, going on safaris (walking, driving, nighttime, and daytime),

visiting a hippo sanctuary, and seeing hippopotamuses in the wild.

During that time, we also visited a nearby village to learn about shea butter harvesting and processing. We also got to talk to the medicine man who lived in that village, and he showed us some of the medicines he makes, and explained what they were made of, how they were taken/applied, and what their purpose was. The first two days of the conference were workshops. I attended a workshop on the first day, which was about wildlife medicine. This was very informal, basically a bunch of different people came up and presented case studies, explaining all the processes and methods used to treat sea turtles. People at that time also talked about their medical (veterinary) equipment and facilities.

After each presentation, the audience members gave their own ideas, explaining their personal experiences with similar cases, and suggesting alternative methods. It was amazing to just be in that room. It was the most cooperative science I have ever observed. On the second day of workshops, I skipped in order to take a tour of the Cape Coast with my mom. This was an incredibly powerful experience, which I have no way of adequately putting into words. Though we visited another national park along the way, the focal point of the day was the two Slave Castles we visited. These two castles were Elmina and Cape Coast Castle.

A lot of the slave castles in West Africa were originally made as ports for the gold trade, which is why Ghana was called "the gold coast" originally, before Ghana. When the gold trade



died down, the European groups in West Africa began to round up the people living nearby to trade to bring them to the Americas. Of course, we all have a basic understanding of the history of slavery, but being there, surrounded by the cells people were kept in, standing on fossilised human waste, being told about the heart-breaking punishments for people who tried to resist, feels unexplainably painful and a bit soul-crushing. To think that people would commit such atrocities against other people is heartbreaking. One strange thing about the whole experience was the complete contrast between looking out off the top level of both castles, looking out toward the ocean, and down at the market below one of the castles where music played and school kids returned riding on a market cart, singing, and then remembering where your standing, and what it means.

**Q: How did this trip help your research and change your perspective on your research?**

It was mostly an incredible learning experience for me. I think my perspective of science, not really specifically on my research, grew with discussions from so many people around the world being there. So many differ-

ent viewpoints and experience levels were represented in the conference. Plus, I attended a short session called "decolonizing conservation," which was eye-opening because they talked about the similarities in the early colonialism movement, and that of the movement of scientists/conservationists for scientific/research/sharing opportunities.

Additionally, they spoke a lot about how turtles being used as a source of income or sustenance, can't just be told to stop; in order to make the change sustainable without putting communities at risk, you have to create alternative income/food sources. This is why some places have buy-back programs, where they pay fishermen for turtles caught as bycatch. This also brings some issues, though, because it could be potentially incentivising fishermen to catch the turtles, and one man gave a presentation on how, instead of paying, he replaced the fishermen's nets when they were damaged because of the turtle needing to be cut out of the net.

**Q: Did this trip help you grow in any way as a student or a person? If so, how?**

This trip really just expanded my knowledge of the world and of people in it. Traveling anywhere can have the same effect, as long as you make an effort to connect with people there, and take the time to learn about the history of the place.