



Traditional food prohibitions (*tapu*) on marine turtles among Pacific Islanders

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Introduction

As ecotourism increases in Hawai'i, turtle watching has become an increasingly popular activity. A recent survey of tourists found overwhelming interest in information about marine turtles and how to go about seeing them. In fact, the Hawai'i Tourism Authority estimates that marine turtles are probably second only to humpback whales as the most popular marine life attraction in the Hawaiian Islands (Balazs 1995, 1996).

Owing to both the status and cultural popularity of these animals, laws have been enacted in Hawai'i making it illegal and unacceptable for people to disturb or harass them in any way (Balazs 1995, 1996; NOAA 2001).

In Hawai'i, as throughout Polynesia and other islands of the Pacific, sea turtles have always been a traditional part of the local culture and have historically been revered as special and sacred beings. And just like the laws that make certain behaviour toward marine turtles illegal in Hawaii today, Pacific Islanders have traditionally had their own sets of "laws" regarding these animals. Many of these "laws" represent indigenous conservation measures that acted as a measure of protection for this special species. For example, the eating or capture of certain species was forbidden (*taboo*, *tapu*, *kapu*) to particular clans, castes, age groups or genders (Johannes 1978). In this paper I present a brief overview of some *tapu* or traditional conservation measures traditionally placed on marine turtles by Pacific Islanders.

Tapu placed on the eggs of marine turtles

In a study of traditional marine conservation methods in Oceania, Johannes (1978) documented a number of ways in which sea turtles have been protected. The natives of Tobi and Sonsorol placed a *tapu* on the eating of turtle eggs and placed fences around the nests for their protection. When hatched, the young turtles were fed for several months and then taken out by canoe to the open

sea to be released. *Tapus* were also placed on taking marine turtle eggs in Vanuatu and Western Samoa. In Samoa, a local chief imposed a *tapu* on frequenting a favourite spot on the local turtle-nesting beach by declaring a certain rock outcrop on the nesting beach to be *tapu*. Since the digging of turtle eggs was a social activity in Samoa, and that particular rock provided the only shade where people could sit and talk, the activity lost its charm to the local people and they took less turtle eggs than before (Johannes 1978:1–24).

Tapu placed on the habitat of marine turtles

In Kiribati, it was the taking of turtles while on the beach that was forbidden. The Enewetak islanders made several uninhabited islands into turtle reserves by forbidding the taking of marine turtles from those locations and made it *tapu* to take all of the turtles found. Traditional *tapus* were also imposed in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia regarding the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) (Lessa 1984).

Tapu placed on the consumption of marine turtles

In Kiribati and Tuvalu marine turtles were protected and their consumption was limited to village chiefs (Zann 1985). In his study of Tikopian rituals, Firth (1967) documents turtles as *tapu* to all but the people who claim it as their totem, the Fangarere. The Fangarere could eat them if they wished and could even be saved by a turtle if in danger at sea. Others regard marine turtles as disgusting and believed that if they should eat it, they will vomit (Firth 1967:256, 362).

In their study of the ethnology of PukaPuka, Cook Islands, Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole (1938) discuss the *tapu* on the belly fats and the major internal organs of turtles. It was *tapu* for all but old men to eat these parts — if any other person consumed them, sickness and grey hair would result. It was also *tapu* on PukaPuka to eat coconut with turtle.

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They tell of one man who did so and was caught by a male turtle and drowned the next time he went turtle fishing. Baby turtles were saved for periods when the chiefs wanted to divide out special foods. They were caught as they emerged from their shells, placed in wooden enclosures, and fed on squid and octopus until of appropriate size (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1938:69, 105, 219, 351).

In the Lau group of Fiji, turtles were a very important feast food. In her study of that area, Thompson (1940) describes turtles as great delicacies, eaten only at important feasts and then only by high ranking persons. In Lau, turtle is considered the most chiefly of all foods and is protected by special *tapu*. Eating the head of the turtle was reserved for the chief of the highest rank, because it was felt to contain the *mana*. The rest of the turtle was apportioned depending on rank. Permission to fish for turtles could only be granted by the chiefs' master fisherman who decided the day and place of the hunt, which was a community event.

The people of Lau also maintained a brackish lake in the centre of the uninhabited island of Wangava, which was used for turtle breeding. As on PukaPuka, young turtle were caught and kept in an enclosure until large enough to survive on their own. At that time, they were released into the lake at Wangava and reserved for the chief's consumption (Thompson 1940:24, 72, 128, 137, 141, 154). Eating the head of the turtle was also reserved for the chief of the highest rank in Samoa. In addition, the juice from the abdominal cavity was reserved for the chiefs as were the front flippers (Hiroa 1930:123).

On Uvea, great seine nets were used to catch turtles at night, turtles were sacred to the king and it was *tapu* for any others to consume them (Burrows 1937:144). Similarly, in Tongareva, Hiroa (1932) documents "the turtle ceremony" where turtle was regarded as of great importance, was monopolised by the high chiefs and priests, and was *tapu* to women in particular. The turtle was cooked on an elevation of stones as a sacrifice to the gods and while the people formed a large circle around it, was consumed by the chiefs. Select lesser male chiefs in the circle would be offered shares but never the women (Hiroa 1932:91).

Conclusion

As this brief overview has demonstrated, the marine turtle has a history of high cultural, often spiritual, significance. These animals have long fascinated people and figure prominently in rituals and *tapus* throughout the Pacific Islands. We have seen here that, like the current laws protect-

ing marine turtles, Pacific Islanders acted in protecting this species by restricting both their take and consumption. What is missing from the cases described above is any discussion of the reasons for and methods of the protection. Why marine turtles? How did they become "elevated" above other food sources? What is it about the turtles that caused them to become worthy of protection? Nothing in this archival research presented any answers to these questions. These are fascinating and important topics that I hope will be form the subject of later research.

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