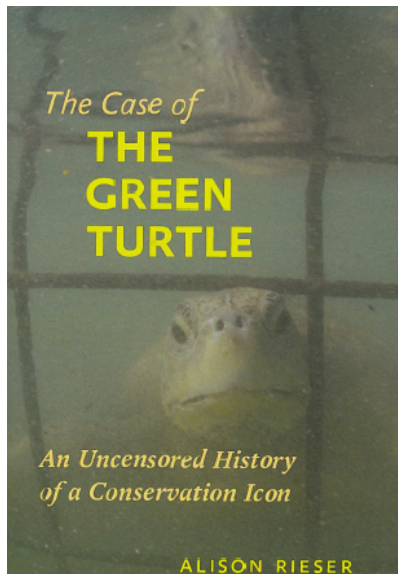


Book Reviews

The Case of The Green Turtle: An Uncensored History of a Conservation Icon

Alison Reiser

2012 The John Hopkins University Press, 338 pages



A further subtitle to this book could be 'conservation versus commercialisation' as that is essentially the focus of the story as it unfolds over time, beginning way back in the 1600s. As with all discussions of conservation issues such as this it is not as simple as the good guys struggling to save a species while the bad guys kill defenceless animals. In many places that turtles nest they were a long-standing, traditional and very important source of nutrition, taken in a sustainable fashion. When money entered the situation, demand for animals increased and pressures on populations eventually began to be noted. Turtles have been commercialised for a surprisingly long time, with canned meat and soup once popular items, often considered 'gourmet', as well as various parts of turtles being used in cosmetics and as jewellery and ornaments. The numbers of animals killed reached staggering levels and the various cruelties visited upon sea turtles during the process of turning them into 'products' also makes for unpleasant reading. Thankfully unthinkable today (although officially legal

until the 60s) at one point turtle 'derbies' were a popular sport. Turtles would be 'turned' to prevent escape, often for many hours, and then ridden down the beach.

Central to this book are two important issues. Firstly the difficulties in assigning a meaningful level of threat and risk of extinction to an incredibly wide-ranging, late maturing, long-lived animal such as *Chelonia mydas* about which so little was known when concern was first raised. At this point in time little was known about breeding population sizes, migration, frequency of egg-laying, age at maturity and other issues vital to assessing the status and long-term prospects of a species. Depending on the criteria used (and the motive behind the designation) a number of answers can be reached regarding scarcity and need for protection and the argument raged long and hard over just how threatened green turtles were. Added to this is the debate over the efficacy, sustainability and morality of turtle farming. The concept behind 'mariculture' is simple: initially wild-caught adults and eggs were reared in enclosed areas and the farmed meat and egg product, as well as the calipee (a substance attached to the interior of the plastron and used in the making of turtle soup) and other 'luxury' items (shell etc.) could be sold on, thereby reducing the pressure and impact on wild populations. The title of Chapter 14 'Conservation through Commerce' sums it up. The pro-mariculture argument is that surplus animals can be returned to the wild resulting in a nett gain in turtle numbers. The argument against farming is built on a number of factors: that the increased availability of turtle products would actually increase the overall demand and that illegal catches and harvesting would continue. Also would a species with an ecology such as that of a sea turtle thrive in artificial

human mediated environments? Could the species be manipulated (e.g. would captive raised turtles return to natal beaches to breed)? Those against the concept refuted any claims of conservation benefit and pushed for the total ban on turtle products. The philosophy employed here is that animals should be conserved purely for their own intrinsic value, without any commercial aspect being involved in the judgements over their classification or value.

The book covers many years, is witness to some pivotal events in conservation (the beginnings of wildlife legislation and organisations such as IUCN and CITES, the early stages of sea turtle conservation and population studies) and features some well - known names such as Archie Carr and Peter Scott amongst many others. Anyone who has read more than the odd paragraph about sea turtle conservation won't be surprised to find that Carr (initially treating the idea of turtle farming as at least potentially promising but later becoming a firm opponent) is a prominent character and participant in many of these discussions and arguments regarding the designation and protection of marine reptiles. It also touches upon aspects of history such as colonialism, war and as ever, human greed and an apparent lack of respect for the natural world. Global in scope, as you would imagine with a species such as this, we see exotic locations, glorious beaches and different cultures.

This is a serious read underpinned by politics, the realities of conservation that are often hidden from the wider public, and the often frustrating lack of cooperation between, and pursuit of, personal agendas by scientists, conservationists and policy makers.

There are a number of good sea turtle books available at the moment and this would not be the book to turn to if you want an overview of the various species and their biology with colour pictures, distribution information or an accessible account of their ecology. This is a valuable book however if taken as a history: of an imperilled species and of our attitudes towards it and the attempts to protect or consume it. In places it is quite dense, dealing as it does with extended court cases and referencing many letters concerning policy issues and scientific debates. There are extensive notes and a ten

page bibliography should the reader seek even more detail and information. It contains some very good and informative black and white photographs which serve to illustrate some of the practices that turtles suffered from in the past as well as many of the characters central to the story. The topics covered and the philosophical, social and political issues raised could equally apply to other groups of animals that are exploited by humans, and the debate on classifying and designating animal species (and the seemingly unavoidable personal agenda imposed by those involved) is relevant to conservation in general. Although the events of this book took place decades ago the story is far from over and *Chelonia mydas* remains 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, with a 'demonstrable risk of extinction' (www.iucnredlist.org/details/4615/0). The causes concerning the original group of turtle conservationists are still considered the major causes today, but since then we have added new ingenious ways of depleting the oceans of wildlife and both marine and terrestrial habitats have become more degraded. Just as well then that we still have conservationists passionate about protecting sea turtles: it appears they are still much needed.

GARY POWELL

*c/o Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, 655a
Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, BH1 4AP
gary.powell@arc-trust.org*