



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

by Alison Rieser  
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When it comes to charismatic ocean species, sea turtles share the spotlight with magnificent marine mammals. However, the seven threatened and endangered species of sea turtles swimming the oceans are more than simply conservation icons. They are oceanic canaries, informing us of coastal and pelagic habitats under siege, of anthropogenic pressures affecting their global abundance and distribution.

Green turtles once numbered in the hundreds of millions. Today, breeding populations worldwide are greatly reduced, primarily due to degradation of nesting habitats, overexploitation of eggs and adults, marine pollution, destructive fishing practices, and nest predation.

Although indigenous peoples have utilized green turtles—the “edible turtle”—for thousands of years, the harvest of adult green turtles increased greatly with the European conquest of the New World. Sailors prized green turtles as food, as they could be kept live onboard until slaughter, providing a welcomed alternative to salt pork and other preserved staples. Eventually, the demand for green turtle meat and calipee to make soup resulted in the development of an active fishery in the Caribbean Sea and other areas.

Renowned sea turtle conservationist Archie Carr and others raised the alarm as they observed very high harvest rates of eggs and adults on and near important nesting beaches. In his book, *The Reptiles*, Carr wondered whether “the green turtle may become one of the first marine vertebrates to be successfully cultured for food.” This led to a larger question: would a green turtle fishery enhance or undermine conservation efforts? Although Carr later became a fervent opponent of green turtle farming, the seed had been planted, and efforts began to make green turtle farming a viable industry. This initiated a 20-year debate, in face-to-face meetings and correspondence, at conferences and workshops, and in legislative halls and courtrooms, as to whether green turtles would be saved or harmed by allowing them to be “the buffalo of the sea.”

Alison Rieser, a professor of ocean policy in the Department of Geography at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has captured this colorful, frank, and important debate in *The Case of the Green Turtle: An Uncensored History of a Conservation Icon*. Professor Rieser pored through countless unpublished letters and meeting records, interviewed numerous participants, and reviewed the scientific and management literature to bring forth a detailed and candid history of this critical chapter in green turtle conservation.

In the United States and much of Europe, green turtles transitioned over the past several decades from food to beloved species. This transition was triggered in part when conservationist Tom Harrison decided it was time to “depolarize luxury products made from turtles.” Carr took this idea to heart, to make people “think twice, maybe three times, before they ever ordered another bowl of turtle soup.” And although Carr once believed that green turtle farming would aid in turtle conservation, he came to believe that any increase in demand would put unacceptable pressures on wild populations. The details of this epic battle to conserve a species declining worldwide are the theme of Professor Rieser’s excellent book.

In August 2012, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration published a notice in the Federal Register initiating a status review of the Hawaiian green turtle in response to a petition to “identify the Hawaiian population of the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS) and delist the DPS under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).”

It seems that the “edible turtle” is now in danger of becoming food once again. For conservationists interested or active in promoting sea turtle conservation, *The Case of the Green Turtle* is required reading. 🐢

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