

BOOK REVIEW: From Soup to Icon: Can the Green Turtle's Status Be Reversed?

Alison Rieser. *The Case of the Green Turtle: An Uncensored History of a Conservation Icon*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 338 pages. \$45.00 hardbound.

The green turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, is much in the news in Hawai'i these days, what with the National Marine Fisheries Service seeming to look favorably on a petition to deprive the Hawai'i population of these turtles from any protections afforded by the Endangered Species Act. The comment period on the petition does not close until October 1, which should give anyone interested in the fate of this species plenty of time to brush up on its history. And there is no better place to start than with Alison Rieser's comprehensive review of the human exploitation of this species.

Rieser, the Dai Ho Chun distinguished professor of ocean policy in the University of Hawai'i's Department of Geography, worked on this volume for years and has the bibliography and citations to prove it. Hands down, it is the most exhaustive and global record yet of the devastating plunder of these animals over the last five hundred years.

While Rieser's prose is admirably clear, her facts well organized, and her narrative compelling, I found it was at times tough to keep reading. Anyone who has been stirred by the quiet presence of a turtle while snorkeling or bathing in Hawai'i's nearshore waters will inevitably stumble on certain passages. Rieser does not shy away from providing grisly accounts and heart-rending photos of the many cruel ways in which turtles were captured, killed and butchered – not always in that order – so that the growing taste for turtle soup on European tables could be sated.

When Columbus reached America's shores, Rieser writes, the islands he called Las Tortugas ("the turtles") "were teeming with sea turtles that looked 'like little rocks'... The islands he described would later come to be known as the Cayman Islands, and their vast herds, or 'fleets,' of breeding green turtles would supply European voyagers, vessels, and colonies for the next 300 years."

One of the key figures in the history of turtle conservation is Archie Carr. At a talk he gave to members of the American Institute of Biological Sciences in 1954, Rieser writes, he noted how "[a]ll early activity in the New World tropics – exploration colonization, buccaneering and the maneuvering of naval squadrons – was in some way dependent on the turtle." He went on to warn, however, that unless the turtle was protected, "it may soon be extirpated as a breeding resident of American waters."

While Carr was referring mainly to the Atlantic and Caribbean turtles, the prospects of green turtles elsewhere were hardly more sanguine. Rieser describes the depredations that occurred in the Pacific and Indian oceans as well, all leading up to the formation in 1958 of the Brotherhood of the Green Turtle, an association made up mostly of men in the publishing business intent on “restoring green turtles to their native waters, and insuring Winston Churchill his nightly cup of turtle soup.”

Carr and many other members of the brotherhood (later to become the Caribbean Conservation Corporation) thought the way to have their turtles and eat them, too, lay in farming. From this came the first major commercial effort, launched by an English chicken farmer, to raise turtles in pens on Grand Cayman island from eggs taken from nests of turtles in the wild.

From its inception to its eventual demise, the operation, calling itself Mariculture, Ltd., never got to the point where the turtles’ reproductive cycle was completed, and it had to rely on eggs taken from nests of wild turtles. Meanwhile, to meet the demand for turtle products – calipee for soup, skins for shoes, flesh for steaks, shells for trinkets – turtle processing factories popped up all along the central American coast in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, devastating the turtle populations.

And more: the opportunity for natives to sell turtles they had traditionally consumed wrought havoc in their communities. As Rieser writes:

“Each turtle slaughterhouse had the capacity to process 10,000 turtles a year. To encourage the Miskito to catch that many turtles, the companies gave the villagers building materials to make houses on the offshore cays. This allowed them to stay out on the turtle banks during rough weather and get in more fishing time. The companies then sent boats up and down the coast on weekly runs, bringing the Miskito fishermen food and more fishing gear, and buying their turtles for cash.”

In short order, the traditional practices of the Miskito were abandoned: “When the men did return home, they brought few if any turtles. The vast majority were sold to the company for cash... so there was not enough [turtle] now to fulfill kin and social obligations, nor to meet the village’s nutritional needs... Social tension was growing in the village, and the villagers’ diet suffered. The outside sources of their food were subject to world market fluctuations and inflation. A sense of being poor was beginning to overtake the community.”

Rieser describes the ever-morphing alliances and estrangements that lay behind the first attempts in the 1960s to arrive at an international arrangement to protect green turtles throughout their global range, attempts that were handicapped by huge gaps in the knowledge of the animals’ age at maturity and their obscure migrations. The more scientists learned, the more they favored restrictions on their trade. Even Carr, the early champion of turtle farming, came to regard the practice as detrimental to conservation efforts.

Rieser’s discussion of the political intrigue behind the domestic regulation of turtles through the Endangered Species Act is especially helpful in understanding the present regulatory regime. By July 1975, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service, Rieser writes, “could not agree whether the green turtle was endangered or threatened. Without this agreement,

there could be no federal regulations and permits for mariculture.” NMFS wanted to list green, loggerhead, and Pacific ridleys as threatened: “This would give the service the flexibility to fashion regulations that allowed the species to be taken, imported, farmed, or otherwise affected by human activities – an approach more consistent with its managerial approach to living marine resources. The endangered species staff at FWS thought the data indicated that green and Pacific ridley turtles were endangered.” NMFS was apparently hoping to delay imposition of any regulation for years, giving the mariculture operation time to show it could close the reproductive cycle, and so it decided it should go through the process of preparing an environmental impact statement on the effect of the proposed threatened listing.

In February 1976, NMFS held a hearing on the matter. Lawyers representing Gulf shrimpers “believed they should have a complete exemption from any turtle protection regulations,” Rieser writes. “They insisted that shrimp trawls caught very few sea turtles; if sea turtles were threatened with extinction, it was more likely that coastal development and pollution were the culprits” – an argument still heard frequently in Hawai`i. Conservationists, led by Wayne King of the New York Zoological Society, argued that the matter should not be NMFS’ to decide. “Given the inadequacies of the EIS, it was clearly appropriate for FWS to have sole jurisdiction over sea turtles,” Rieser paraphrases him as having testified. As for the mariculture operation that NMFS was trying to protect, “there was no hope that Cayman Turtle Farm [its new name, following bankruptcy] would attain self-sufficiency from wild-caught eggs... By marketing sea turtle products around the world, the farm would encourage others to take turtles illegally in order to cash in on this demand. Poaching was very difficult to prevent, given the remote locations of sea turtle nesting beaches. As IUCN had found in 1975 ... turtle farming was not in the conservation interests of the green turtle.”

Before the final decision on the green turtle’s status under the ESA, the parties to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species had already placed all species in the family *Cheloniidae* (loggerheads, greens, hawksbills, and both species of ridleys) in Appendix I, the list of those species facing extinction, Rieser notes. Trade in products from these animals is generally outlawed among members of the convention – a circumstance that, for all practical purposes, ruled out any hope of commercial success for turtle farming operations. In response, the Fish and Wildlife Service had “promptly issued regulations to implement CITES,” notwithstanding NMFS’ proposed listing of the green turtle as threatened.

Rieser describes the efforts to resolve the standoff between NMFS and FWS: “The agencies decided to list as endangered the sea turtle populations that were the most depleted or were suffering the highest rates of exploitation. These were the Florida and Mexican green turtle nesting populations and the Mexican populations of Pacific ridleys. All other species in the family *Cheloniidae* were listed as threatened. Once these classifications were agreed to, they could settle on which agency had jurisdiction for future policy decisions.”

The eventual agreement called for NMFS to “make the call on how to restrict fishing activities that involved encounters with sea turtles; FWS would have sole jurisdiction ‘over sea turtles, including parts and products, when on land,’” Rieser writes. “Because sea turtles spend so little of their very long lives on land, this arrangement left some people scratching their heads, everyone except those who knew about the controversial turtle farm.” At a Senate committee hearing on the ESA, she

continues, “Senator John Culver asked NMFS deputy director Jack Gehringer what would happen if they found a turtle that could fly. Culver proposed that jurisdiction should go to NASA.”

Finally, by July 1978, the turtle rules were published by NMFS and FWS. With products from turtle farms now being banned from entering the United States, it became illegal for the Grand Cayman operation even to transship their product to Europe by way of Miami. Its owners appealed the rules in federal court, but to no avail. In a joint brief filed with the court by the directors of NMFS and FWS, Rieser writes, “They stood behind the regulations they had issued in July: there would be no exception made for trade in green turtle products derived from mariculture,” since in their opinion, “such trade was likely to stimulate demand for turtle products at a level that no single farm could satisfy. This renewed demand would inspire any number of new farms to get into the business by taking wild turtles and wild-laid eggs for their stock.” The district court upheld the regulations, as did the appeals court in 1980, in a decision that seems to have turned on a flaw in the turtle farm’s appeal. “The transformation of the green turtle from food to icon was thus affirmed by the narrowest of margins,” Rieser writes. “There would be other acts and players drawn into the drama. But for the connoisseurs of green turtle soup, and the proponents of conservation through commerce, the play was over.”

Although Rieser’s narrative concludes here, in the “Introduction,” she takes note of the current debate over whether to relax legal protections for the green turtle. “Currently, several conservation scientists are marshaling evidence that the green turtle is no longer endangered,” Rieser writes. “Aware that this classification is both a scientifically derived status and a social construction, these scientists have a variety of motives and tactics. Some seek to demonstrate that conservation interventions can work and that species can be returned to a nonimperiled state. Others believe that the total preservation strategy adopted in the late 1960s worked an injustice in some human societies; they seek to restore the green turtle to the status of an exploitable resource.”

She continues: “The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List is the international classification scheme for species, and it has classified the green turtle as globally endangered since 1968. The specialists responsible for this classification argue within their ranks (and in their publications) whether the green turtle is really endangered globally. But under the cover of this debate, they are actually reprising another debate that raged among turtle scientists during the 1970s: should the green turtle be commercially exploited or protected from all human consumptive uses until its role in tropical marine ecosystems is restored?”

For more than four decades, the American public has got on just fine without turtle soup. What demand there was for tortoise-shell trinkets has been filled by plastics. The shifting public image of the turtle – from the exploitable “buffalo of the sea” to a charismatic icon of nature – is not going to be easy to reverse, no matter how well populations recover. Rieser’s book is a timely reminder that the debate over regulations that are to be informed by the “best science available” is ultimately and, even more importantly, one that will be informed by our values. As NMFS weighs the petition to delist the Hawaiian green turtles, it will be interesting to see how this plays out.

-- Patricia Tummons