

A BLOODY MESS

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Charlottesville, Tobago is a small quiet fishing village colorful with flora and fauna, the sounds of children splashing about, calypso and reggae music and the only place I have ever been that you can here roosters crow all day.

Living in Tobago for well over a decade I have had the chance to have had a peek at a piece of the “Vanishing World”, and sadly I have watched it slip into a state of emergency.

I once enjoyed and witnessed the freedom of this little island village, fishing without permits or foraging for food while children ran about without worries. I could walk into the small village grocery shop with sandy bare feet and buy a cold Carib to drink in the sunny street. Buying doubles (curry chick peas with fried dough) from the doubles man on the curbside for a few TT bucks was always a treat, knowing he would be hitchhiking over to Charlottesville every Tuesday and if you had no money you could simply pay him some another time.

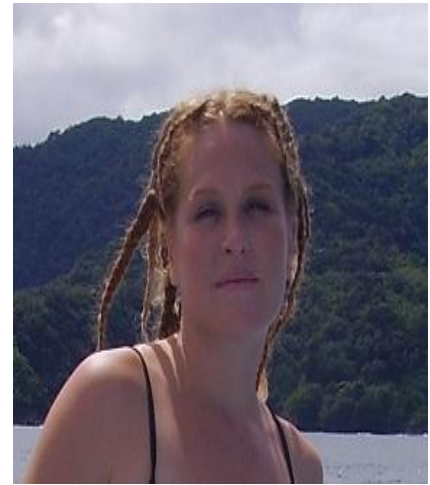
I fell in love with that little island. Barter was still a large part of its system. Coconuts traded for tomatoes, tomatoes traded for rice, rice for fish. It was great fun. We would gather and watch TV together as a community by the beach bar or meet on the sand for acrobats and jokes.



Hunting and fishing was also always a part of this community. At one time before sea turtles were on the endangered list, they were hunted and shared among the people as a source of food. In those days almost all of the village men were hunters, fishermen, farmers or gardeners. There was a certain respect for nature and what it offered.

But at some point there became a serious lack of respect; the old folks are the first to tell you that. Over hunting, over fishing and pollution are all part of the current crisis. Making a living became more important than just living.

As I recognized and tackled problems like the endangered sea turtles being slaughtered, killed almost in spite, my daughter Kitty and I often stood alone. And as I taught her that some times you must stand alone, we spent many days heaving massive captive turtles facing a sure death, out of boats and guarding nesting females. We would hike at night to remote beaches waist deep through muddy landslides to save one more turtle for one more day.



At first I thought that the brutal killing was instinctive and primitive hunting. But the older folk say there was a respect and understanding for nesting turtles and mother hens and re planting trees and for reproduction in general. Although I am sure that they killed the turtles then in the same manner they do now, today there is no respect. With the modern world clashing with theirs, its money, money, quick money. I think that originally each generation learned to hunt for survival but when hunting for survival became unnecessary, it simply became just a hunt. Perhaps instinctive but still an unnecessary, destructive hunt. Locals feel it's their heritage and right to kill what they want and in vain they do. During fishermen's fete, June and July is the worst. For the sake of boasting about having turtle meat to serve guests, dozens of nesting mothers are be headed, de-flipped and chopped into pieces. Their eggs taken before they even have the chance to become one out of a thousand to survive on through to adulthood. Also with the world changing quickly I think the older generation has no idea what to teach the new and with little opportunities and not knowing where to find them, its much easier to make a quick dollar butchering and selling a few pounds of turtle meat.



In 1998 I was forced to watch a large Hawksbill sea turtle slaughter. As a dull knife slit her throat and her plastron (chest) was cut off, her flippers still thrashed around and I knew she was still alive. Her eggs were harvested and thrown into a poachers boot. My eyes filled with tears of frustration and my passion turned into a mission.

Over the years I worked with well known turtle and environmental groups such as SOS, Save Our Sea Turtles and Environment Tobago but more help at the North East of the island was in dire need. Turtles were being slaughtered and there was not enough man power to “hold the fort”.

In 2008 we officially registered the group that was started years earlier with my daughter Kitty and Patricia Turpin. NEST, North East Sea Turtles is a small-scale environmental community-based organization that aspires to protect the natural environment of the sea turtles in the north of Tobago. At current there are only a small number of volunteers, but all extremely devoted to NEST and its conservation efforts. Its home base is Charlottesville, built and registered in order to create programs for a sustainable living for poachers and other locals through Eco tourism rather than by slaughter and egg harvest. I always hoped to work with poachers rather than against them, some were like family to me, some were my friends and fellow fisherman. I often attempted to educate, share turtle watching and rescue experiences with young poachers. It changed some but usually older poachers remained violent on the issue.

On one of the most beautiful tiny secluded beaches, I slept under the stars many times with my daughter, comforted by the sound of Caribbean waters greeting the shore where several turtles would come up all at once and nest around us. The beach is lined high with rich green vegetation, bread fruit trees and a quaint little river. Up the river there also stands an old impressive silk cotton tree. Today, on any given day, rain or shine, there you will find fresh hawksbill and green sea turtle shells covered by a bloody mess and where the sand meets the palms you will find leatherback turtle remains along with the stench of death. Poachers used to hide the hard turtle shells by tucking them behind the silk cotton, not anymore. Today as if to taunt us all they leave a long trail of shells out in the open. This is a gut wrenching sight. All Tobago’s nesting sea turtle’s are on the endangered list.



Until recently both foreign and local Environmentalists like Patricia Turpin, President of Environment TOBAGO, were fighting a frustrating and lonely fight. But the Government can no longer ignore the bad press around the world and tourism that is rapidly disappearing. Their sweet T&T is disappearing.

Drastic measures are now needed and are being taken in order to salvage this petite paradise before it’s lost forever.

On September 26th, 2011 the Minister of Agriculture and Marine affairs signed the legislation banning the hunting/killing of all marine turtles. Until then there were loop holes in the law that made it difficult to implement. Now we can focus on getting adequate assistance towards enforcing the new law. A few days later hunting of all other kind was suspended until further notice. Fishermen were also informed that fishing permits will be required for all fishing. This is triumphant for the ecosystem and biodiversity and for environmentalists, conservationists, naturalists and ecotourists, and in fact for the preservation of the entire island. But it is also a bitter loss of heritage and freedom for the local people. These kinds of modifications, rules and regulations are upsetting to those who feel that their heritage is being threatened. It is and it may be lost forever. But without these applications ALL will be lost.

We have known for a long time that humans are the greatest threat to all animals and their natural habitats and to the environment we live in, but still we continue to chew up what is not ours. It is an insult to the Creator.

Please visit our North East Sea Turtles Facebook page. A web page is currently being built. Facebook administrators are happy to answer questions. We need volunteers, we need donations, suggestions and we need letters to be written. We need people to stand up so we don't stand alone.

Change is inevitable but If we do our very best to preserve and protect this "vanishing world" we may be able to hold on to it until we can figure out how to save it.