

The Departure of the **TURTLE MOTHER**



Along Nicaragua's Miskito Coast lives the legend of the "Turtle Mother," a magic rock that once was situated on the shores of Turtle Bogue—the lone volcanic mountain in Costa Rica called *Cerro Tortuguero* that is one of the Caribbean's most important green turtle nesting beaches today. According to this story, at the start of each nesting season, the rock—which was shaped like a turtle and faced the sea—turned to point toward land. When it turned, the villagers knew that the turtles were coming ashore and that they could begin to harvest the turtles' meat and eggs. When the season's last hatchlings had emerged from their nests and scampered down to the sea, the turtle rock would turn back around to face the sea.

It was commonly stated that long before Turtle Mother was discovered in Tortuguero, the magic, turning rock existed in Great Sandy Bay in the Miskito Keys. But when people ate too many turtles and harassed the rock—trying to forcibly turn her ashore or move her from her perch—the Turtle Mother vanished, taking her turtles with her. Simultaneously, the sandy beach washed away, leaving only rocks. The old timers claimed there were a number of Turtle Mother rocks around the Miskito Keys, associated with headlands and areas of high relief, each guiding in separate populations of turtles.

Most of the old turtle hunters from the Cayman Islands, Tortuguero, and the Miskito Keys claimed they last saw the rock in the late 1940s, sitting on the beach near the mountain. As exploitation of the turtles escalated, the rock moved onto the mountain. At the height of the calipee (sea turtle cartilage) trade, when the green turtles were butchered and left to rot on the beach, the Turtle Mother rock vanished completely into a cave on Cerro Tortuguero. After villagers tried to find her inside the cave, a landslide buried the entrance.

The Turtle Mother legend has remained amazingly consistent since I first heard it in 1973. In a war-torn community where rumors run rampant, consistency of any tale is unusual. Nevertheless, the size, shape, and type of rock in this legend have remained generally the same.

A new twist, however, was added to the lore in 1988 when I again visited the Miskito Coast. Fishermen in the area stated that they had heard that “the rock was broken.” Some said that when the rock was last seen, a foot or flipper had disjoined; others said that it had a crack in it. They believed that scientists, writers, and tourists had caused it to break by studying it. Allegorically, I believed the breaking of the rock symbolized the deterioration of the Miskito culture itself—cracked from war, dislocation, malnutrition, and misery.

For years, the Turtle Mother legend seemed to be an isolated mythological oddity, restricted to the Miskito Coast of Central America. Then, in 1991, Dr. Jeanne Mortimer advised me of a similar legend in Malaysia. There, a large rock that sat on a hill, calling leatherbacks to the beach, was deteriorating, causing turtle populations to decline.

A visit to Rantu Abang in the state of Terengganu on Malaysia’s east coast confirmed that there was indeed a large rock. The 3-meter slab of limestone lay shattered atop a hill overlooking the ocean. Unlike the ethereal Turtle Mother of the Miskito Coast, this rock could be seen and touched. It did look like a turtle—with a broken head and limbs.

My guides informed me that this rock was called the “Turtle Father.” Another rock, submerged in the nearby Rantu Abang River, was known as the “Mother of the Turtles.” When the turtles came to nest each year, they would swim by to visit that rock. Extensive siltation and runoff from rainforest deforestation have buried the rock, however, and changed the mouth of the river, so the migrating turtles can no longer come.

The Seri tribe of Sonora, Mexico, is one indigenous culture that maintains its strong traditional, cultural ties to sea turtles. A four-day ceremony celebrating the ancient leatherback turtle is one of the Seris’ most sacred traditions. Since 1981, the Seris had been unable to perform this ceremony in their home community, due to declines in the leatherback population. Mayra Olivia Estrella Astorga (at right) is one of five Seris who, in 2006, traveled across the Gulf of California to the Baja California Sur peninsula to perform the traditional ceremony with leatherback hatchlings. Ancient cave paintings—including illustrations of turtles—found near Loreto in Baja California Sur were likely created by Seri ancestors more than 750 years ago. Seri elder Alfredo Lopez (at left) appreciates the story these relics tell about his people’s age-old veneration of leatherbacks. © OCEAN REVOLUTION



The local people said that environmental exploitation had also caused the rocks to break. Poaching of too many eggs, deforestation, slash-and-burn agriculture over the past 30 years, and a million tourists gawking at the leatherbacks had caused the Turtle Father to shatter into a dozen pieces and the Mother of the Turtles to vanish into the mud.

Versions of this legend exist throughout the Pacific. Dr. George Balazs, a turtle biologist, noted to me a similar legend in the Hawaiian Islands. A large stone at a hotel on Hawaii was called “Pohaku Honu,” meaning “Turtle Stone.” If the stone was cared for properly, legend said, the turtles in Hawaiian waters would be large, plentiful, and tasty.

The Turtle Mother lore is a manifestation of a greater mythology—the world rests on the back of a colossal turtle. Generations of people in the Asia-Pacific region and the Americas once held that belief.

The question must be asked: If we continue to exploit the turtle and spoil the world, will the creature beneath our feet become disgruntled and take a dive? Or is she already sinking slowly down into the depths, washing all our garbage and human trappings off her shell—a new allegory for rising sea levels and climate change? If so, take heart, for one day, the turtle must come back to the surface for air. The broken turtle rock can heal, and life can begin anew.

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