



Recovery at Ascension

The nesting green turtles were incapacitated by turning them onto their backs. Ascension Island, circa early 1900s. © ASCENSION ISLAND HERITAGE SOCIETY

The remote island of Ascension lies just south of the equator, equidistant between Africa and South America. At only 90 square kilometers, it is easy to miss. Indeed, in the Second World War, pilots were told, “If you miss Ascension, your wife gets a pension!” But the green turtles that migrate more than 2,000 kilometers from the waters off Brazil to breed there appear to have little difficulty reaching the isle.

A barren volcanic island, Ascension provided little in the way of food for mariners; hence, sea turtles became a valuable source of meat

along their route. In 1815, the island was occupied by the British Marines, who traded turtles to passing ships and, fortunately, kept detailed records. Females that ventured onto the beaches to nest were captured and stored in purpose-built ponds until they were traded. A record 1,500 females were captured in one year, with many transported to the United Kingdom to become turtle soup for the Lords of the Admiralty.

After a few decades, it was clear that the trade was having a severe impact on the turtle population. In the 1930s, the trade was no longer economically viable, with fewer than 50 females captured in a season. Analysis of harvest records between 1822 and 1936 revealed that in excess of 19,000 females must have nested at Ascension Island before 1822 for the population to have survived such high levels of harvest.

In addition to the steadfast protection of the Ascension greens on their nesting grounds since the 1950s, their successful recovery can be attributed to the impressive conservation efforts of Projeto TAMAR, which protects these animals on their foraging grounds in Brazil. Thanks to the collaboration of these far-flung conservationists, and the resilience of nature itself, the Ascension greens illustrate a dramatic recovery, with more than 12,000 females currently nesting and numbers rising annually. The steepness of the rise indicates that this population may, in the future, double its current size.

Since 1998, *Annette Broderick* of the Marine Turtle Research Group (www.seaturtle.org/mtrg) has led teams of researchers from the University of Exeter and on Ascension Island to monitor the marine turtles at Ascension.



Turned onto their shells, the green turtles were transported to turtle ponds, where they were sold to passing ships or to the local community for consumption. Ascension Island, circa early 1900s. © ASCENSION ISLAND HERITAGE SOCIETY