

Curbing the Balinese Sea Turtle Trade

“Ketut, there are 300 rioters outside, demanding to see you. They’re threatening to burn down the office.”

It was February 21, 2001, eight o’clock in the morning, in my home village on the island of Bali. I had my coffee in one hand and my cell phone in the other. This was not something I had expected to hear on the other end of the line. Then again, I had never expected to find my photograph on “Wanted: Dead or Alive” signs scattered around the coasts of my native island, nor had I expected to receive death threats at my home. All I had ever expected was to do my job—to protect the coastal waters of my homeland and the species within them.

Sea turtles are an important part of my personal, religious, and cultural heritage. In the Hindu traditions of Bali, sea turtles are honored. It is said that Earth rests on the back of an elephant that stands atop a turtle. Morality tells me it is wrong to kill these animals. Science tells me that the sea turtle poaching occurring around most of Indonesia’s shores is fully unsustainable. Between 1975 and 1995 alone, there was a nearly 90 percent drop in nesting populations in Indonesia, and the last nesting observed on any Bali beach had been in 1970.

By the 1980s, Bali boasted the largest sea turtle trade in Indonesia, and the Bali markets were an internationally infamous nexus for the killing of thousands of sea turtles from around the region.

In 1990, a law was passed in Bali that limited the capture of green turtles to an annual maximum of 5,000 animals. The meat of these

turtles was to be used only for cultural activities such as traditional wedding ceremonies. The green turtle quota was never enforced, however, and turtle species other than the green were not even recognized by the 1990 law.

Several months before the riot facing me that morning, determined to make a change, my colleagues and I had begun working with the Balinese government, Hindu religious leaders, and the Bali government’s tourism association to discuss the potential impact on Bali’s tourism industry if the sea turtle trade were not stopped. The trade was contradictory to the Balinese reverence of the turtle as a holy creature, I contended, and the green turtle quota was clearly and continually being exceeded. Most important, the turtle trade on our island did not only affect populations in Bali; most of the turtles were coming from

other areas of Indonesia. Because of the lack of effective monitoring to enforce a quota, I advocated an absolute ban on sea turtle hunting around Bali.

Numerous discussions and mounting support from the local government and religious leaders, led Governor Dewa Made Berata to issue a new law in 2000, banning all sea turtle trade on Bali. In early February of 2001, committed to enforcing the new policy, police officers went to the seven coastal holding pens from which most sea turtles were sold, tore down the enclosures, released the turtles back to sea, and sent the turtle traders to court.

That morning in February, I knew who the rioters outside of my office were. They were the sea turtle hunters and vendors whose trade had been



The sea turtles were kept in pens before being slaughtered and sold. Tanjung Benoa, Bali, 1991. © JEFF CANIN / HATCHLING PRODUCTIONS



Ketut Putra tags an olive ridley in Alas Purwo National Park, Indonesia, before releasing it to the ocean. © AMALIA FIRMAN / CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

abolished by the new policy. They were out of work, they were angry, and they were armed.

I called the governor's office to seek protection. Staff members sent a car with four armed policemen to drive me to my office and escort me safely through the rioters into the building. The rioters sent five leaders inside to speak with me. They conveyed one message: "Because of you, we can no longer hunt and sell sea turtles. Because of you, we have no jobs."

I was quick to defend that the new sea turtle trade ban was not my policy but the Balinese government's. "My role is not to create policy," I tried to explain. "I am only a scientist. I provide information about sea turtles, but I do not make the laws. The facts show that sea turtles are disappearing, and the government created a policy to protect them. If you have a problem with this policy, then you should speak to the policymakers—not to me!"

And off we went—to speak to the policymakers. Out from my office and through the center of town, I led 300 rioters straight to the front door of the governor's office. The governor's assistant agreed to meet immediately with 10 representatives from the crowd.

He defended the policy and the arguments I had posed many times before. Fifty percent of Bali's economy depends on tourism, he explained, whereas the sea turtle trade provides income to very few people and is offensive to tourists who visit our island. "We will not change the policy," he said, "but we will work with you to find new livelihoods outside of the turtle trade."

Although they were not fully satisfied when they left the vice governor's office, the sea turtle hunters and vendors did achieve an important milestone that day by beginning a dialogue with the government. From that point forward, they worked with the government on alternative livelihood solutions within Bali's tourism industry. The solutions are not flawless, but we continue to make headway. Former turtle poachers are now successful boat makers for tourism enterprises. Previous vendors of turtle satay now serve pork, duck, and fish instead.



Balinese police officers and local community members work together to enforce sea turtle protection. Here they release a turtle that has been illegally captured, 2004. PHOTO COURTESY OF NGURAH MAHARDIKA

Prior to 2001, more than 30,000 green turtles were captured from Indonesian waters and sold in Bali each year. Today, fewer than 500 turtles are captured. As a result, populations in Indonesian turtle rookeries have a better chance to recover.

Those few hundred turtles that are still captured are traded on a black market that continues to diminish, because Balinese officials still strongly enforce the turtle trade ban. I have faith that they will continue to do so, because they understand the need for conservation, see its economic benefits, and have a common belief in the sanctity of the sea turtles of Bali.

Ketut Putra is currently the marine director of Conservation International—Indonesia and still calls Bali "home." During the events of this article he was the director of WWF-Indonesia's marine program, based in the Bali office. Lisa M. Bailey is the marine communications manager at Conservation International in Washington, D.C. This is Ketut's story; Lisa helped him chronicle it for SWOT Report.