



# From Corail to K É L O N I A

l'observatoire des tortues marines



## A New Chapter for Indian Ocean Sea Turtles

For thousands of years, sea turtles have been hunted for their meat and used to produce various consumer items such as jewelry, leather, and medicine. This consumption has ranged from subsistence to large-scale commercial practices. To meet those consumer demands, some people and groups have attempted to breed and raise sea turtles in captivity. Although nearly all of those facilities have since closed because of sea turtles' endangered status, trade restrictions, and dwindling demand, some have been redefined to live on in a new light. *Ferme Corail* (Corail Farm), on the French Indian Ocean island of Réunion, is one such facility, and to follow its story is to follow the changing landscape of human interest and intervention in the lives of sea turtles.

*Ferme Corail* sea turtle ranch was established in 1977. Constructed with local and national financial backing and the support of local communities and the French government, the primary goals of this facility were to create jobs and earn foreign revenue through the export of turtle meat and products.

The supporters of the ranch believed that marketing and selling “ranchéd” sea turtle products would lower the human pressure on wild turtle populations, yet still meet the demand for the products. Additionally, *Ferme Corail* would rely on the collection of hatchling turtles from the wild on nearby Europa and Tromelin islands. Because of this association, those islands were declared to be protected nature reserves.

Despite the fact that this endeavor was based on the premise of sustainable use of a natural resource and that it sought to balance conservation and consumption, the ranching project attracted serious criticism from environmental organizations at the time. In addition to this opposition, the listing of sea turtles on Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1981 severely complicated basic operations by prohibiting the international

export of sea turtles or their products and thereby limiting the market to Réunion itself.

However, by the 1980s, *Ferme Corail* had become the most visited tourist site on Réunion Island. So, in 1989, the Réunion Regional Council lent its support to sea turtle research, conservation, and tourism by buying the *Corail* complex and by petitioning the appropriate ministry to establish a legal framework under which a new institution could operate.

The subsequent “Rehabilitation of the *Ferme Corail*” was financed by the Réunion Regional Council and the European Union. Built directly on the site of the former turtle ranch, the new facility—Kélonia, the Observatory of Marine Turtles—was born in 2006 with a double mission: to educate the public about the importance of conserving the area’s natural and cultural heritage regarding sea turtles, and to participate in and develop research and conservation programs for sea turtles and their habitats.

This innovative center of excellence for research and public education is a testament to the vision of the people of Réunion Island. Kélonia’s exhibitions have been designed to illustrate the role of sustainable consumption, particularly of marine resources. The purpose is to encourage visitors to reflect on the necessity and the difficulty of reconciling economic factors, society, environment, and culture, with great emphasis placed on both social and natural sciences.

Today, more than 100,000 people visit Kélonia each year, making it a highly successful tourist attraction and positioning Réunion Island as a major player in the research and conservation of sea turtles and their habitats in the Indian Ocean.

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THIS PAGE: Built on the site of a former sea turtle farm, Kélonia’s observation tanks give visitors a glimpse of sea turtles in their underwater world. © FRANÇOIS-LOUIS ATHENAS  
 AT LEFT: A tourist prepares green turtle hatchlings for release in Hawaii. Firsthand experiences with sea turtles spark wonder and appreciation, helping to foster long-term support for marine conservation. © DAVID DOUBILET