

Jessy, the Flying Yapese

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE SUPPORTS RESEARCH
IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC OCEAN

By TAMMY MAE SUMMERS and IRENE KINAN KELLY

Slipping beneath the waves, he pulls himself deeper with his arms, careful not to break the surface—the sound barrier—as he flies downward. Below the surface, he floats, suspended for a moment, contemplating, calculating, and anticipating his quarry’s next move. Without warning, he descends with one arm outstretched, his fins efficiently slicing through the last seconds of his prey’s peace.





After disappearing into the depths, he suddenly emerges from the darkness with something light in color—the white underbelly and flippers of a sea turtle, which flap with urgency as it panics, squirms, and attempts to rid itself of this unwelcome hitchhiker. As the freediver gently guides his trophy upward, they spin together in a slow waltz, passing through light beams refracted from the intense tropical sun above. Gracefully they ascend, helping each other to the surface and their next life-giving breath. Jessy Hadpei has caught another green turtle.

Jessy was taught the art of turtle catching by village elders in Ulithi, Yap, Micronesia, where he grew up hunting sea turtles as a means to provide food for his community. Village tradition requires that after catching a turtle, one must present it to the chief, who then decides whether it can be eaten or released. When turtles were taken without the chief's permission, both the perpetrators and the entire island community were penalized through restrictions in boating or fishing that essentially prevented the community from harvesting seafood. This culturally enforced conservation practice thus limited the number of sea turtles caught.

Jessy still hunts turtles—for research—in the waters surrounding Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

(CNMI). The local CNMI government, Division of Fish and Wildlife, actively sought and negotiated for Jessy's unique free-diving skills, because the use of nets or boat capture by "rodeo" techniques is not feasible in this part of the western Pacific Ocean. During the 2008–2009 field season, Jessy captured an impressive 78 green and 2 hawksbill turtles for biometric investigations and genetic sampling. This work contributes directly to analyses of regional connectivity in sea turtle populations that inform the management policy of the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service. This partnership is a win-win-win situation in which (a) Jessy is employed to do what he loves (free-diving and fishing), (b) the CNMI has a blossoming in-water capture program, and (c) the sea turtles in Saipan have received some measure of increased protection.

This story is not unlike the success of other global programs that have gained positive research and conservation benefits through the integration of community members with indigenous knowledge. Jessy executes his work with pride, gratitude, and respect for the village elders who taught him the traditions and who entrust him to uphold them. Today, the program—with Jessy at its core—continues to evolve as more and more local agencies and community stakeholders get involved, thus contributing their strengths and abilities to reduce poaching and the effects of development for the conservation and management of sea turtles in the CNMI. ■

THIS PAGE: Coming up from a free dive, Jessy Hadpei brings a green turtle to the surface as part of research efforts in the Northern Mariana Islands. © CHRISTOPHER ALEPUYO AT LEFT: Jessy grew up catching turtles in Micronesia, where they are a traditional food source for his community. Today, he is putting his skills to use by catching turtles for research. © CHRISTOPHER ALEPUYO