



Traditional and Modern Cultures Unite in Pursuit of Healthy Oceans

By TIM DYKMAN

More than 80 percent of the world's truly wild locales are home to indigenous peoples. Many nations with these locations are rising to the challenge of diminishing oceanic resources by pairing traditional protections with new tools and strategies. The Kuna of Panama and the Comcáac of Mexico are at the forefront of a growing global network of indigenous communities organized and mentored by Ocean Revolution through the Native Oceans program funded by The Christensen Fund.

Native Oceans provides indigenous leaders with a forum, a set of tools, and a network capable of combating rising threats to wild and healthy oceans. Since Native Oceans members hosted the January 2008 International Sea Turtle Society Symposium in Loreto, Mexico, many have participated in a series of exchanges expanding protections to new oceans and new sea turtle cultures.

The first of the exchanges took place in November 2008 when Comcáac community members from Mexico visited the Dhimuuru Rangers and the Torres Straits communities of Australia. Working with the Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance's Dugong and Sea Turtle Management Project, the Comcáac patrolled Dhimuuru sea country, tagged green turtles on Dowar Island, and fished the remarkably resilient community-managed fishing areas of the Great Barrier Reef. The Australians successfully encouraged the Comcáac to seek financing of turtle and habitat protections from their government agencies, as the Australians had done. Members of the Torres Straits Regional Authority, motivated by what they learned about the dire situation facing sea turtle populations in Mexico and the cultural sacrifice by the Comcáac people in stopping their turtle hunt, quickly created eight new community resource management areas and developed plans for managing their own marine territories by customary methods.

THIS PAGE: Members of the Comcáac Nación of Sonora, Mexico, traveled to the Kuna community of Armila, Panama, to participate in a leatherback hatchling release ceremony. Because of decimated leatherback populations, the Comcáac have not been able to have this ceremony in their homeland for over 30 years. © TIM DYKMAN AT LEFT: Summer interns from the Karen Beasley Rehabilitation Center assess the health of a female loggerhead that washed up on a beach in North Carolina, U.S.A. © NEIL EVER OSBORNE / NEILEVEROSBORNE.COM

Also in 2008, a major leatherback nesting area was discovered in Armila, Panama. Kuna tribes have been protecting the leatherbacks for hundreds of years. Armila and Yandup (a significant hawksbill nesting area), more than nine hours apart by boat, are now working together to stop the killing of all turtles in Panama. They are demanding a return to historic Kuna protections to rebuild populations decimated by years of habitat destruction and by demands for turtle products for medicinal and consumptive purposes. Joining forces with the Comcáac through a Native Oceans exchange is providing a means to that end.

Though the leatherback is the most powerful icon in Comcáac culture, the last encounter with it in Hant Comcáac occurred in 1983. For two generations, the stories, songs, dances, and language associated with the leatherback have not reached the young people of the tribe. In May 2009, at the height of the nesting season, 20 Comcáac community members (elders, adults, and children) traveled to Kuna Yala to perform their leatherback ceremony for the first time in 27 years. The two communities alternated singing, dancing, storytelling, game-playing, and chanting with documentation, measurement, nest protection, and exchange of centuries of traditional behavioral science.

Indigenous communities often use a complex, adaptive integration of science, economics, culture, and spirituality in their stewardship of nature. Sea turtle habitat and nesting areas managed by indigenous citizens and by scientists function better than neighboring areas. When fortified by modern conservation science, efforts by these groups will significantly increase the likelihood that we can achieve our common goal of healthy oceans. Their plea is simple: sea turtles are part of our protected family. When our family comes to you in your home, please do not hunt them for commercial products. Let them reproduce, protect them from the attacks of predators, and do not let them die helplessly in fishing nets. Give them clean places to nest and feed. Respect them and love them, as they are also part of your family. ■