



# Sea Turtles and CITES

By MARYDELE DONNELLY

When a ship laden with hundreds of sea turtles is intercepted in the South China Sea, the bust generates international attention. This clandestine activity undercuts conservation, but trade today is only a fraction of what it was when sea turtles were first included in CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) in 1975. At that time, hundreds of thousands of sea turtles were killed every year for international trade, a situation noted in the Sea Turtle Conservation Strategy (1979):

Few groups of animals are more valuable and magnificent and at the same time more misused than sea turtles. Able to serve as a source of protein for coastal peoples in the tropics, they have been overexploited most frequently to feed, clothe, and adorn the wealthy in Europe, North America, and eastern Asia.

Widespread concern about sea turtles and the trade in skin (of olive ridleys and green turtles), shell (of hawksbills and green turtles), and meat and calipee (of green turtles) led to early CITES prohibitions on trade that placed most species on either Appendix I (meaning no trade is allowed, or trade is allowed only with permits under exceptional circumstances) or Appendix II (meaning trade is allowed with permits). By 1981, all sea turtles were included in Appendix I. Yet, despite this international protection, trade intensified for several years as countries stockpiled turtle products or traded under reservations (exceptions) to the CITES ban (for example, France, Italy, and Japan).

Just a few years later in 1985, sea turtles faced a new challenge as Suriname, France, the United Kingdom, the Seychelles, and Indonesia sought to reopen hawksbill and green turtle trade at the Fifth Conference of the Parties to CITES. Fortunately, the CITES Parties had little interest in allowing Indonesia and the Seychelles to export wild-turtle products. The debates over four proposals to permit international trade in ranched green turtle meat, skin, and shell were contentious, though the proposals were ultimately defeated. Those proposals became a major focus of that 1985 meeting, as did Cuban efforts to reopen the trade in wild hawksbills with Japan in 1997 and again in 2000, with both sides arguing passionately about the adequacy or inadequacy of biological data, conservation benefits, and trade controls. Although the votes for Suriname's and Cuba's proposals were close, the CITES Parties have, over the years, consistently rejected all proposals to reopen international sea turtle trade, most of which were focused on farms and ranches.

Sea turtle farms (closed-cycle systems) and ranches (stock collected from the wild) have been the subject of extensive discussion at CITES. Successful crocodile ranching generated interest in the possibility of commercial sea turtle mariculture, despite significant differences in the biology and conservation of sea turtles and crocodiles. After years of debate, the Parties adopted Conference Resolution 9.20, *Guidelines for Evaluating Marine Turtle Ranching Proposals*, in 1994; sea turtle farms are regulated by CITES farming requirements for Appendix I species.

Decades ago, famed turtle biologist Archie Carr labeled the green turtle “the world’s most valuable reptile.” Although CITES has significantly reduced the international green turtle trade, illegal commerce continues today in places such as the U.S.–Mexico border region, where meat is smuggled from Baja into southern California for Holy Week celebrations. And green turtles continue to be hunted legally in large numbers in many countries because CITES does not restrict domestic use. As more countries pass national legislation to implement CITES restrictions, use is expected to decline.

In recognition of their global plight, sea turtles were among the first species listed on the CITES Appendices when the treaty came into force, and CITES protection over the past 35 years has been critical to ensuring their survival. Formidable opposition from some CITES Parties to all attempts to weaken sea turtle protection and a unified effort from the conservation community have been key to maintaining the international ban on trade. ■

## PROPOSED CHANGES TO TURTLE PROTECTION UNDER CITES AND THE RESULTS

YEAR	PROPONENT	PROPOSAL	OUTCOME
1983	France	Ranched greens in Réunion	Rejected
	Suriname	Ranched greens	Rejected
	U.K.	Special Resolution to exempt Cayman Turtle Farm products as pre-Convention	Rejected
1985	Suriname	Ranched greens	Rejected
	France	Ranched greens in Réunion	Rejected
	U.K.	Ranched greens in Cayman Islands	Rejected
		Special Resolution to exempt Cayman Turtle Farm products as pre-Convention	Rejected
	Seychelles	Annual export quota for 100 wild male hawksbills	Rejected
	Indonesia	Downlist resident wild greens	Rejected
Downlist resident wild hawksbills		Rejected	
1987	France	Ranched greens in Réunion	Rejected
	Indonesia	Downlist resident wild greens	Withdrawn
		Downlist resident wild hawksbills	Withdrawn
1989	Indonesia	Annual export quota of 3,000 wild greens	Withdrawn before meeting
		Annual export quota of 3,000 wild hawksbills	Withdrawn before meeting
1997	Cuba	To Japan, export the <6 tonne stockpile of hawksbill shell, and annually export the shells of up to 500 harvested or ranched hawksbills	Rejected
2000	Cuba	Export the 6.9 tonne stockpile of hawksbill shells to Japan, and annually export to Japan or to a party with equivalent controls, the shells of up to 500 turtles	Rejected
		Export the 6.9 tonne stockpile of hawksbill shells to Japan	Rejected
2002	Cuba	Export the 7.8 tonne stockpile of hawksbill shells to Japan	Withdrawn before meeting
	U.K.	Register Cayman Turtle Farm as a captive breeding facility to allow export of turtle carapaces	Rejected

Note: There have been many proposals to lift CITES international prohibitions on sea turtle trade from ranched and wild populations, and all have failed. Data source: CITES.

AT LEFT: Green turtles are raised in captivity at Cayman Island Turtle Farm on Grand Cayman Island in the Caribbean. Sea turtle farms and ranches have been the subject of heated debate over the years in meetings of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. © STEPHEN FRINK