

# The Wayuu

## SHEPHERDS OF THE SEA

by HECTOR BARRIOS-GARRIDO

The convergence of human settlements and marine turtles in coastal areas around the globe is well documented, resulting in a long list of traditional groups that count sea turtles among the key elements of their ancient history. Marine turtles are commonly found in the petroglyphs, rupestrian art, and mythical stories among Pacific Islanders, for instance, and sea turtle bones have been found alongside human bones in pre-Hispanic archaeological sites in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Many indigenous groups around the world revere turtles to this day for their spiritual and cultural values and as a source of food, medicine, and other products that are crucial to their daily lives. In recent decades, as national laws such as fisheries bans and endangered species protections have contradicted traditional uses of sea turtles, some native groups have quietly continued their practices but have

become more cautious about sharing information about their customs with nonfamily members. It can sometimes take years for outside researchers and anthropologists to earn the trust of indigenous people and to develop the intercultural skills needed to gain insights about indigenous cultures and perspectives; as such, modern scientists have barely scratched the surface of understanding the incredible relationships between marine turtles and indigenous people that have remained intact for millennia.

The most populous indigenous nation in both Colombia and Venezuela are the Wayuu, direct descendants of the Arawak people who once inhabited an enormous portion of the

southern Caribbean before the arrival of Europeans. The Wayuu's traditional territories today lie mostly in the Guajira Peninsula (for that reason, Wayuus are also colloquially called *Guajiros* in Spanish), with some hamlets also found on the slopes of the Sierra de Perijá mountains on both sides of the Colombia–Venezuela border. This ancestral territory is in the northernmost portion of South America, between Colombia and Venezuela, facing the Caribbean Sea. Hence, the Wayuu's magical and cosmogonic world is full of stories that relate to the sea and its inhabitants.

The Wayuu consider themselves to be the protectors and custodians of an ancient culture based on maintaining a harmonious alliance with nature. They consider natural elements such as mountains, trees, and animals as their kin. Within their matriarchal society, wisdom, beliefs, customs, and ancestral rituals are passed from one generation to the next orally in Wayuunaiki (Wayuu language) through stories and myths and are rarely spoken of in the presence of “Alijünas” (non-Wayuu).

The Wayuu were classified by Europeans during the colonization period in two groups: shepherds and fishers. Wayuu people refer to the latter as Apaalanchi, and for the Apaalanchis marine turtles are an extremely important component of their culture. One Apaalanchi who we interviewed claimed “... they (marine turtles) represent to us what petroleum represents to Venezuela; they are vital for us.” In the Wayuu magical realism and belief system, marine turtles are referred to as the “cattle of the sea”; the sea is the Wayuu's backyard, and the coral reefs are the flowers in their gardens. Apaalanchis have their own perspective of the sea, where snappers are considered their goats and Atlantic goliath groupers are their donkeys; in similar fashion, barracudas are dogs, lobsters are hens, green morays are snakes, sharks are jaguars, and so on with all marine fauna. In a nutshell, the Apaalanchis define themselves as shepherds of the sea.

Everything Apaalanchis have is provided by the sea, including their medicine. They use multiple marine species to treat illnesses, and marine turtles play an especially important role in their traditional pharmacopoeia. Up to 11 parts of the marine turtle are used as

medicine, and they may be administered in at least seven different ways. Asthma, rheumatism, high blood pressure, kidney stones, and diabetes are some of the diseases that, according to Wayuu traditions and beliefs, are cured by using marine turtles. Marine turtles are even used as preventive medicine, protecting the Wayuu people from the “bad spirits” that may produce illnesses and death in their community.

Marine turtles have many other positive connotations in the daily life of Wayuu people. Dreams of marine turtles are considered messages from Maleiwa (God) and the ancestors. During funerals, sharing turtle meat among the mourners minimizes their pain and suffering, and the Wayuu believe that marine turtles will accompany the deceased to the mythical place of *Jepirá*, where the Yoluja (spirits) wait before returning to Earth as *Juyá* (rain) bringing life to the arid Guajira Peninsula.

Similar traditions are found in West African aboriginal people, who also have strong cultural links with marine turtles. It remains unclear whether these similarities (1) are coincidental, (2) represent cultural co-evolution, or (3) are linked to the proven interactions between African ex-slaves and Wayuu people during and after the colonization period. Research to understand this potential connection is still in its early stages.

Marine turtles also play a vital role in reaching adulthood for Wayuu young people. Young male Apaalanchis must harvest a turtle in front of their family (sometimes in front of all the community) to commemorate adulthood, and young female Wayuu members must shower with “moon water” (water that has been bathed by the light of the moon for a night) dripped from a marine turtle carapace. In this way, both males and females receive all the benefits and properties of marine turtles, including longevity and fertility.

We are still in the process of understanding all the traditional ways the Wayuu indigenous people use marine turtles, and we strive to remain unbiased observers while not promoting the illegal use of marine turtles in the Guajira Peninsula. Instead, we are seeking compromises through in-depth discussion among all stakeholders about the regulations that are needed to include Wayuu traditions and beliefs in the modern legal frameworks for sea turtle protection in Colombia and Venezuela. ■



AT LEFT: Wayuu community leader Teresa Fernandez from the Uariyu clan poses with a green turtle that she and her family rescued on the Guajira Peninsula. © PATRICIA VITALE I VERDE SALVAJ