From fishe to flagship

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RECENTLY, one of us published a book on the history of sea turtle conservation in India. It was titled *From Soup to Superstar*[1] because it provided an overview of the leap that turtles (especially olive ridleys) had made from being an item on the menu of local communities and colonists to a marine conservation icon. In this article, we argue that this transformation of sea turtles from being food to flagships of conservation in many parts of the world, especially India, is a result of various parochial and whimsical influences rather than a reasoned process. Therefore, debate and discussion on the use of sea turtles needs to be reopened at both local and global levels.

As a group, sea turtles have a rich social history because artefacts, written records and material remains of these animals have been found in many inhabited locations, many of these dating back to prehistoric times. From biologist Jack Frazier's detailed overview of archaeological records,[2] we know that Bronze Age peoples ate turtle meat and used the carapace to make

1. K. Shanker, *From Soup to Superstar: The Story of Sea Turtle Conservation Along the Indian Coast*. HarperCollins, Noida, 2015, p. 400.

2. J. Frazier, 'Prehistoric and Ancient Historic Interactions Between Humans and Marine

ornaments. Records maintained on clay tablets from Mesopotamia (c. 2000 BCE) indicate that turtles were sacrificed to the gods, and treatises from the 1st century CE refer to a brisk trade in tortoise shell objects (made from hawks-bills) across the Indian Ocean. More recent studies have found that turtles still hold considerable dietary, cultural and economic value for many indigenous communities such as those in Hawaii, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, as well as those living along continental coastlines such as that of Mexico, Venezuela and Nicaragua.[3]

Wherever such communities have managed to resist 'mainstream conservation' influences, their hunting is directed by elaborate culture specific rules and practices. In contrast to the multidimensional relationship that such peoples have with turtles, the Europeanised world has fervently adopted and rejected a series of monolithic ideas on how humans should interact with turtles.

For example, Spalding's study of shipboard cuisine in the 16th century describes how green turtles were viewed solely as an important marine resource during the age of imperialism and were heavily exploited by seafaring colonial powers such as Spain, England and Holland.[4] These countries fished sea turtles by the thousands and stored them in the holds of their ships, or dried the meat in vast quantities, to feed the crew for weeks or even longer periods of time.

The notorious but accomplished marine explorer William Dampier, who sailed around the world three times in the 17th century, mentions in his travelogue that the green turtles of the West Indies were the most sought after because they were 'the best of that sort, both for largeness and sweetness.' The scale of this harvesting was such that in an early attempt to regulate it, the Bermuda Assembly passed 'An act agaynst the killinge of ouer younge tortoyses' in 1620. The regulation forbade any extraction of sea turtles within 'five leagues' of the shoreline and of individuals less than 18 inches in size so that it could prevent 'waste' of the turtle population. Violators had to pay up 15 pounds of tobacco (an expensive commodity), half of which would go to the government and half to the complainant. As a result, the act also supported a rudimentary form of community monitoring of this food resource.

However, as historian Charles Foy notes in his engaging blog, by the 18th century, sea turtles were no longer considered a cheap food to be consumed only by sailors and other labourers.[5] Instead, the consumption of turtles, in the form of soup in particular, became a symbol of high social status. Restaurants on either side of the Atlantic Ocean began to advertise this delicacy and those who could not afford the real thing but still wished to maintain a fashionable facade had to settle for the 'mock turtle soup' which was made from the cheaper cuts of calves and pigs.

The enduring children's classic, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was written in the 19th century, alludes to this trend in a poem on turtle soup: '..so rich and green,/Waiting in a hot tureen!' and the original illustration depicts the creature singing this, the Mock Turtle, as an animal with a calf's head and a turtle's body. The turtle consumption frenzy continued well into the 1900s and turtle farms, processing units and canneries were set up in many countries.

By the mid-1900s, sea turtles had also started to attract the attention of many biologists, notably Archie Carr, and projects to quantify and monitor turtle populations across different countries began to take shape. Moreover, after World War II, several erstwhile colonial powers as well as the United States of America became increasingly concerned about the state of natural resources all over the world.

This spurred the establishment of conservation organizations such as the Flora and Fauna International (FFI), Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Many of these institutions showed considerable overlap with respect to their founding board members and office bearers. For instance, Sir Peter Scott played a key role in all three – FFI, WWF and the IUCN – at different times. As a result, their normative orientations converged. Another common feature was that they had an explicitly international mandate because they aimed to shape the management of nature in the global South and did not focus only on their native/member countries.

In other words, international wildlife conservation was built on the bedrock of older colonial connections and in keeping with this, a few key people from the global North set the direction for decades to come.[6] With respect to turtles, Carr himself headed the newly formed Marine Turtle Special-

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Turtles', in P.L. Lutz, J.A. Musick and J. Wyneken (eds.), *The Biology of Sea Turtles*. Volume II, CRC Press, Boca Raton, 2003, pp. 1-38.

3. I. Kinan and P. Dalzell, 'Sea Turtles as a Flagship Species: Different Perspectives Create Conflicts in the Pacific Islands', *Maritime Studies* 3(2), 2005, pp. 195-212.

4. S. Spalding, *Food at Sea: Shipboard Cuisine From Ancient to Modern Times*. Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland, 2015, p. 265.

5. C. Foy, *Turtles, Turtle Soup and Class at Sea*. 2014, https://uncoveringhiddenlives.com

6. J.M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*. University of Manchester Press, Manchester, 1988, p. 352.

ist Group (MTSG) of the IUCN in the 1960s and his own conversion from turtle soup connoisseur to turtle protectionist strongly influenced the philosophy of the group as a whole. But not everyone in the MTSG shared Carr's urge to preserve turtles from all forms of direct use. For instance, Nicholas Mrosovsky, another senior member of the MTSG, did much to keep debate and discussion of alternative perspectives alive (such as sustainable use of turtle meat and eggs) and wrote a number of provocative pieces over decades. He was, however, in a minority because the issue remained highly emotive with most conservationists decrying consumptive use as 'murder most foul'.

To this day, the MTSG as an entity remains firmly protectionist (even if all the members do not agree) which is at odds with the IUCN's own policy on sustainable use (as articulated by the Sustainable Use Specialist Group) as well as with other groups within the IUCN such as the Crocodile Specialist Group. It is tempting to mull over what trajectory turtle conservation might have taken, if say, someone from the Miskito, Meriam or Nicobari communities had been at the helm of such an institution right at the outset and had imposed their form of marine resource management on other nations and cultures.

To return to reality, this global shift from use to preservation has particular resonance in the Indian context. Historical sources indicate that turtles were exported from India and Sri Lanka to the Roman Empire 2000 years ago, fished in the Gulf of Mannar (probably for centuries), and the eggs were collected along much of the coast. After India became an independent country, food security was a matter of concern and many articles were written by scientists in the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Zoological Survey of India and the Bombay Natural History Society on the value of turtle fisheries as an affordable and abundant source of protein. Even in the 1970s, turtle eggs were so common and cheap that they were used as 'adulterants' by many bakers in Calcutta: they were used to cut the cost of baking Christmas cakes and their fishy smell was masked by the liberal use of vanilla essence.

But overall, from the 1960s onwards, conservation discourse gained momentum and marine turtles were repackaged from being food to being viewed as flagship species in such an emphatic manner that today it is impossible to discuss their use within conservation circles in the country. Why did the use of animals that we once consumed become taboo in modern times? Was it, as some have argued, entirely due to the ideals promoted by the global North? Or were there internal social factors too that contributed to solidifying current attitudes towards harvest and consumption?

Here, we will argue that four factors have fed into Indian protectionist culture: two of these are global and two local. First, conservation in the West was derived from the peculiarly American, Muirian notion of 'pristine wilderness' and as mentioned earlier, powerful international NGOs subscribed to this ideal and drove the creation of national parks and sanctuaries in both Africa and Asia. As many historians have pointed out, a key difference is that in the specific case of India, it did not occur in a land politics vacuum (as is true for parts of Africa) but rather, reinforced the centuries-old tradition by which rulers had set aside hunting preserves.

From this perspective, the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 (IWLPA) was only a continuation of this system and, therefore, colonial and post-colonial preserves were only marginally different in their philosophy and implementation. The idea of preservation obviously meant that access to wildlife within such areas was prohibited and their use banned – this was extended to certain species found outside reserve areas as well.[7]

The second factor, also a generic global phenomenon, is the growing influence of the animal rights discourse. Proponents of animal rights tend to oppose the killing and captivity of any animal in principle but in practice they are most often vocal in the case of charismatic, appealing animals because these can attract enormous public support – a crucial ingredient in any animal rights campaign. Such campaigns highlight the woefully inadequate or downright painful ways in which many animals are captured or maintained in captivity because their goal is to focus attention on animals as individual, sentient beings. This is in stark contrast to conservationists, whose opposition to killing or captivity stems from concern over the effect it may have on the population in question and even so, only if the species is 'genuinely' wild and threatened, i.e. it is not invasive, feral or common in that region.

The difference in priorities has led to several controversies over what constitutes appropriate management of such animals. Conservation groups with an animal rights orientation often engage in expensive and labour-intensive rescue and rehabilitation of a few individual animals, such as injured or lame turtles for instance, and view these as laudable efforts. But conservationists often disagree because the death of unfit individuals is a part of natural selection and when a species

7. M. Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History: An Introduction*. Permanent Black, Delhi, 2001, p. 150.

is found in the hundreds of thousands in the wild (as is the case with any sea turtle), it seems misguided to expend resources on a few select individuals.

To add to the confusion, the drastic protection measures advocated by a combination of conservation and animal rights groups with respect to charismatic animals often means that the survival and suffering of local communities that are dependent on or affected by such species is pushed firmly into the background.

The two local factors relate to the role played by certain elite actors in the national context. As mentioned earlier, hunting had been prevalent in India for centuries but the right to hunt large game was usually claimed by powerful individuals or communities. With the passage of the Wildlife Protection Act, hunting was no longer legal and it was precisely these large iconic animals that were listed in Schedule I of the act and, therefore, strictly protected even when found outside reserves. One could argue that if the members of princely families themselves could not engage in hunting, they had little reason to support the lower classes' traditional rights to engage in such activities. Second, the forest bureaucracy of that period was staffed or guided by several princely *shikaris*-turned-conservationists and their new-found zeal for preserving animals, versus mounting their skulls, held sway.

Moreover, in the post-colonial setting, conservation took on nationalistic overtones because wildlife was now referred to as a part of 'India's rich heritage.' This framing was often used to justify the exclusionary tactics of protectionism and fuel older social fissures, especially between the haves and have-nots.[8] It is in evidence even today, around the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary for instance, where certain influential groups support the fishing restrictions imposed by the park, not out of their interest in the fate of olive ridleys but because it helps them exclude others who are viewed as outsiders or competitors.

The final argument we present here is tentative but one that merits further reflection. We suggest that apart from royalty, another group's predilections played an important role in shaping conservation in the newly independent state – namely the Brahmins, who are typically staunchly vegetarian. There were many who served in advisory or administrative capacities and are known to have opposed any form of management that involved hunting or direct use of wildlife because they viewed these as cruel practices.

For instance, several early chroniclers of turtle harvesting in Odisha focus on the gory nature of the practice but rather than developing say, guidelines for regulated or humane turtle fisheries, they often ended their piece with a call for a blanket ban. There was, of course, no thought expended on what such fishing communities would eat or trade in, when a freely available, nutritious resource was removed from their reach. Therefore, contemporary animal rights discourse in India also resonates with certain entrenched casteist, communal notions of how people ought to interact with animals, especially in terms of whose dietary norms are 'acceptable' and whose should be forcibly altered.

In conclusion, we suggest that the conservation community needs to revive what Archie Carr called 'England's greatest culinary contribution', i.e. the consumption of sea turtles, in a regulated manner and refill the cultural and dietary vacuum that heavy-handed protectionism has created.

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8. Ibid.