

# Traditional Taboos

## Help Save Ghana's Sea Turtles

By PHIL ALLMAN and ANDREWS AGYEKUMHENE

The nation of Ghana in West Africa may be familiar to outsiders as the first sub-Saharan country in Africa to gain independence from colonialism, or as the first African nation visited by Barack Obama after he became president of the United States, or, more likely, for its soccer team (the Black Stars), which consistently upsets the teams of bigger nations. People who visit Ghana, however, know the country for the love its citizens show for their cultural heritage. Ghanaians are extremely proud of their country and show their infectious passion for tradition through their music and dance, their festivals, and even their livelihoods.

The presence of juju priests and fetish shrines in many communities serves as a reminder of longstanding religious traditions that integrate physical objects and spells in the worship of ancestral spirits or gods. The traditional strictures and taboos are often tied to conserving nature and protecting water bodies, forests, and animals. At least three major ethnic groups along Ghana's 550-kilometer (341.75 miles) coast respect a traditional rule that restricts fishing on Tuesdays, for instance, because Tuesdays are widely accepted as the day when the sea goddess and her children rest. When asked about the consequences of someone fishing on a Tuesday, Asua Kpakpa, a fisherman from Accra, simply stated, "If you dare go, you will see what human beings are not supposed to see on the high seas." If fishermen break the directive, they must face tribal leaders to account for their actions.

Some coastal communities also forbid fishing during certain times of the year. Others dictate fishing methods, and some even fully prohibit the consumption of certain fish species. When prohibited species are captured, they must be released unharmed because they are considered beloved children of the sea goddess, Mami Water. The traditional mores and rules may have originated as tools to increase community-based fishery management, to enhance fish production, or to protect fingerling-size fish from premature harvest. Indeed, many of the forbidden species are now known to have extremely low reproductive rates such that intense harvest could lead to local extinction. In the absence of scientific knowledge, traditional regulations have likely preserved many vulnerable fish species over the centuries.

Fishing communities in Ghana also respect a taboo against touching, harming, killing, or eating sea turtles. Recent surveys covering Ghana's entire coast indicate that this widely respected taboo serves two primary conservation functions: (a) making fishermen more aware of the five different species of sea turtles and (b) making fishermen more willing to protect turtles on land and in the sea.

The most common traditional story regarding the origin of the sea turtle taboo comes from the Ga and Akan ethnic groups of central Ghana. Members of those groups tell the tale of their ancestors being caught in a storm at night while fishing. The boat sank, and as the men were struggling to stay afloat, a group of sea turtles appeared and helped them back to shore. A similar story told by the Nzema and

Ahanta groups in the west recounts that a slave ship was caught in a storm when a group of sea turtles rammed the hull of the sinking ship, bit off the shackles of the enslaved Ghanaians, and then helped them to reach the shore and freedom.

The Dangbe people of eastern Ghana, who live along the mouth of the Volta River, tell a more elaborate story dating back to the time that the Ashanti Empire was expanding eastward into Dangbe lands.

The Ashanti outnumbered and overpowered the Dangbe, pushing them to the edge of the Volta River, where they were trapped between the river and a brutal Ashanti force. Just before the Ashanti warriors arrived for what may have been the deciding battle, sea turtles and crocodiles appeared in the river. The crocodiles lined up to form a bridge for the Dangbe people to safely retreat across the river, and the sea turtles assisted the injured and elderly who were unable to walk across the crocodile bridge. The sea turtles and crocodiles then dived back into the deep, preventing the Ashanti forces from crossing the river. The Dangbe people are still grateful to the crocodiles and sea turtles for saving the lives of their ancestors, and both animals are fully protected in that region of Ghana to this day.

Unfortunately, sea turtle conservation in Ghana has become more complicated than simply promoting traditional taboos. The tribal animist foundations on which these taboos are based are rapidly eroding because of the spread of secularism and the rise of Christianity and Islam among Ghanaians. Many of the customs and beliefs associated with traditional practices are now relegated to festivals and the tourism sector. Forest habitats in Ghana that once were protected as shrines are now being cleared for agricultural use. Freshwater habitats that once were protected as the homes of very powerful gods are now being polluted and overfished. Likewise, along the coast, fishing activity on Tuesday has become more common.

Transmigration also plays a role in the breakdown of those nature-protecting taboos. Many of today's coastal fishermen moved from inland communities, where hunting and agriculture have become increasingly difficult. Those fishermen do not adhere to the traditional stories of the coastal ethnic groups and, as a result, are routinely seen breaking traditional codes that date back hundreds of years. Sea turtles that are captured in fishing nets are more often slaughtered and sold at market than released as in days past because fishermen, locked in to a cash economy, must recover the expense of repairing the damaged net. Even nesting sea turtles are now poached in many coastal communities because of the large quantity of meat that one animal can provide.

The Ghana Turtle Research Project (GTRP) has worked for more than 10 years to engage community members in sea turtle conservation as a way of celebrating their culture and tradition. The GTRP helps communities establish and promote sea turtle ecotourism, works with fishermen to reduce sea turtle bycatch, and strives to empower local communities to take leading roles in implementing an array of programs that protect sea turtles and their habitats. More than 50 community members have created a volunteer network that helps in those efforts. The GTRP works to restore and reinforce Ghanaians' pride in their culture and traditions of nature protection and to ensure that the sea turtles that Ghanaians believe once helped their ancestors win battles, survive the sea's wrath, and attain freedom from the bonds of slavery will continue to enjoy the reverence they deserve. ■



A wildlife guard watches a nesting leatherback turtle in Ada Foah, Ghana. © FRANS LANTING / WWW.LANTING.COM