

Magic & Mixed Feelings in Turtle Paradise

By ISABEL SILVA

The words *island paradise* conjure a certain image in the mind, likely a place where one would go to experience what Dr. Wallace J. Nichols calls *Blue Mind*—“A mildly meditative state characterized by calm, peace, unity, and a sense of general happiness and satisfaction with life in the moment.” And for readers of *SWOT Report*, this paradise likely has sea turtles, too, and palpable “turtle power.” Earth rests balanced on the back of a turtle, after all, according to many indigenous cultures for which turtles are part of their spiritual family, laden with traditional significance and magic as well as practical value. Turtles have always been currency: meat, shells, eggs, decorations, even aphrodisiacs. Turtles, turtle stories, and turtle culture ignite passions and can drive people to the frontier where truth meets belief.

In the Northern Mozambique Channel lies an island called Vamizi, which has been at the center of trade, food production, and power struggles in the Indian Ocean since the 16th century. Today it is recognized as one of the planet’s most magnificent and expensive island resorts—and a turtle conservation success story of magical proportions. Vamizi attracted conservation projects and scientists even before the resort’s first guests were welcomed by none other than Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel, Mozambique’s former first lady.

During more than a decade of conservation, Vamizi’s 1,500 native residents have entirely turned away from their longstanding tradition of daily turtle consumption. The story appears to be an inspiring example of organization, innovation, and perseverance led by the

hard-working Vamizi Conservation Team of Joana Trindade, Isabel Silva, Cardoso Lopes, Wakati Daude, Raufo Mijai, and Momade Issa.

The remarkable evolution to zero turtle consumption began more than a decade ago. Turtles were always on Vamizi: hawksbills feeding between the coral reefs and green turtles coming to nest. Before the tourism lodge was built, the turtles were eaten, as seen in countless old photos. The turtle project started in 2003 by protecting nesting beaches. The Vamizi Conservation Team hired the best and most experienced turtle poachers to conduct nightly patrols. They found and marked the nests, digging them up after the eggs hatched to count the eggs and to free hatchlings trapped deep in the sand. Tourists assisted with measuring and marking the turtles, and fishermen and tourists

gathered together to release the baby turtles. Villagers were amazed, asking, “Why do the tourists wake up in the middle of the night to see our turtles?”

Thrilled by their initial successes, the team began to reward fishermen who brought turtles that had been caught in their fishing nets. They organized theater performances, wrote songs, and created activities that put turtles in the spotlight. The program was so successful that the team was invited to other communities to talk about the importance of sea turtles and to show how turtles, by attracting tourists, had changed the lives of local people for the better. In a country where poverty makes turtle meat and eggs a very attractive source of inexpensive protein, giving up consuming turtles is an extraordinary achievement. The hard work and investment of the Vamizi Conservation Team and the commitment of the local villagers truly made Vamizi a magical oasis for turtles.

Or so people thought.

Recently, social scientists who visited Vamizi marveled that they never saw turtles being killed and that everyone positively affirmed that “in Vamizi, no one kills or eats turtles.” The scientists conducted days of interviews, in which a surprising truth was uncovered about the team’s perceived success when one villager offered a new clue in

A storm brews above the idyllic waters of Vamizi Island, Mozambique. © TIM DYKMAN

whispered tones, saying, “The turtles of Vamizi have a spell... They receive a poison injection from the scientists, and if you eat one, you will die.”

The Vamizi Conservation Team’s pride and confidence were shaken, and their dream of magic was clouded by mixed feelings. On further questioning, they discovered that the local community had ceased to eat turtles not for reasons of conservation, nor in solidarity with the team, but rather because they believed that the tags used for research were actually “casting a spell.” For years, the team had been attaching metal flipper tags on nesting turtles, affixing them with sturdy tagging pliers. When the villagers first observed this unusual (to them) procedure, the rumor quickly spread that the scientists were injecting the turtles with poison so that the villagers would die if they ate them.

For now, Vamizi’s turtles are safe, and the newly emerging truths about local motivations for ceasing turtle consumption have served to harden the resolve of the Vamizi Conservation Team. They pledge to continue the work and to redouble their efforts to educate and engage residents, lodge guests, and all other stakeholders about the importance of conserving Vamizi’s magical sea turtles—a key component of this island paradise. ■