

Conservation quantified

Tioman Island's Juara Turtle Project discusses the price placed on letting turtles live

TEXT AND IMAGES BY CHARLES FISHER

WE HAVE been operating a sea turtle conservation programme, called Juara Turtle Project, in a small village on Tioman Island. The village, Kg. Juara, is fast becoming tourism-oriented and moving away from other means of income, such as farming, fishing and rubber-tapping. Issues that have caused the local and worldwide decline in sea turtle populations are the same issues faced all around the world, everywhere there are sea turtles and people.

Since we live here on Tioman, where sea turtles also live, it is our goal to try and conserve this site as a healthy nesting area for these chelonians. Our approach started by taking for granted the idea that everyone wants to help the sea turtles, and in turn help their own tourism economy over the long run by having a healthy beach, reef and tropical ecosystem. We talked locally about biodiversity and how the sea turtle species are going extinct around the world, thus making Kg Juara a special and important location for them.

While many people agreed with these ideas and points, the practical application of conservation was often lost, and the unfortunate, but totally understandable, desire to continue developing overruled ideas on saving nature for the future.

We ran into some flaws by promoting conservation strictly based on biological and preservation reasons and decided to try some other tactics. For instance, if the needs of biodiversity do not resonate with

someone operating a resort, then perhaps we ought to try speaking more in line with their interest in profits. With these ideas, we began promoting how helping turtles could help business, how much tourists like sea turtles, and how helping to preserve a nesting beach is also like preserving an economic asset for the future. There are even statistics out there on how much one turtle is worth to the tourism industry, creating revenue from snorkel

trips, diving, location promotion, general interest and more.

Additionally, we started a very simple sea turtle nest sponsorship programme. Traditional egg collection, which is still legal in Malaysia, creates some income for the one family that is doing the collecting and selling. We, however, can pay for the nest to be collected and brought to our hatchery and then begin to generate exponentially more revenue from it over the two months that it lays incubating. We create revenue from our specific nest sponsorship programmes,



The Juara Turtle Project works with villagers, tourists and volunteers to conserve turtle nesting sites found along the shores of Kampung Juara in Tioman

Inset: The nest sponsorship programme



tourist information tours, volunteer involvement programmes and from supportive organisations. That revenue is all based on interest and support for the eggs being collected, protected and put in the sand to hatch, instead of being sold or eaten.

So where traditional egg collection can create limited income for one family, through conservation we can generate far more income and spread it among far more people. The recipients of this income include the three local families working with us, the family we rent land from, the government to whom we pay taxes, two full-time Malaysian marine biologist staff, one foreign worker, quite a few assorted school and village functions and as many local contract workers as we can make projects for.

When a turtle egg in the market is valued at about RM3, we can estimate a protected turtle egg to create about RM25 of value, and of course, a protected egg could possibly create one more sea turtle!

However, either the pockets of conservation are not deep enough, or our organisation is not adept enough, because sea turtles are still losing literal ground on which to come and nest. The income generated and spread around by nest protection does not compare with the potential income generated by a two-storey hotel with beachside pool and bar, and everybody seems to know it. Natural beaches are becoming scarcer here on Tioman, as are the turtles in the sea becoming scarcer owing to ongoing threats, such as trawling nets, pollution and global egg collection.

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Volunteers hard at work transferring collected eggs into the hatchery, in the hopes of getting plenty of hatchlings to be released back into the sea



As we continually restructure our approach here on Tioman, we have realised the importance of highlighting and promoting the biological aspects of conservation as well as appealing to the financial. While conservation and nature preservation can be healthy economically and socially, many tourist areas with now-wasted ecology still have very prosperous tourism economies. While the success of a conservation effort may likely be determined by profitability, the benefits of conservation itself cannot be totally quantified within the ideals of profits. 🐢