

Supplement

Significance of anecdotes for historical perspective: black bear predation on sea turtle eggs

Karen A. Bjorndal

Letter from Wenzel J. Schubert to Archie Carr, University of Florida, written on 14 June 1961.



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Dr. Archie Carr,
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Dear Dr. Carr:

It was a pleasure indeed to read the article in this week's Saturday Evening Post about the comeback of the green turtles. On the chance that it may add something to our knowledge of these turtles during the last days of their primeval state in Indian River and on Hutchinson's Island, I relate the following from my own personal recollections:

My recollections start about 1894 at the time the FEC Ry. was being built from Ft. Pierce south. I recall the iron being laid across my Grandfather W. H. Tancre's pineapple fields at Ankona (7 miles south of Ft. Pierce) which his diary shows to have been in March, 1894.

Though not many people realize it, the lower east coast of Florida was one of the last pioneer areas in the U. S. To the best of my knowledge no commercial fishing or turtling had occurred before that date. A fleet of four or five stern-wheel steamers, of 30-ft. beam and 160-ft. length, with iron hulls and wood burning furnaces, had been in operation six or eight years prior to that time, but it was not until the arrival of the railroad that ice and barrel factories were built in Ft. Pierce, and both commercial fish gill-netting and seining and turtling got under way on an extensive basis.

Turtle eggs were considered a delicacy at that time, and so far as I know there was then no law protecting the nesting turtles. It was my boyhood job to keep the village supplied. I patrolled the beach on Hutchinson's Island from Mud Creek south to Nettle's Island (Snake Island, I believe its called now) about five days a week during June, July and part of August. Bears got most of the nests, and it often happened that I would have to cover the beach by moonlight and catch the turtles actually on the nest, or get there immediately after the eggs were laid, to beat the bears.

I suppose I must have seen a couple of hundred bears during my boyhood, and occasionally I shot one for food. Some of them were huge. The last I killed was in 1909. I saw a newspaper notice, however, to the effect that Fred Saeger and the two Waters boys had killed a mother bear and two cubs on the island in 1910. And, while on the subject of bears, the Florida Agricultural Station issued a bulletin on pineapple experiments carried out somewhere around Jensen in 1898 or 1899, which reported the tests inconclusive because the bears ate all the fruit.

But to get back to the turtle eggs:

I continued my beach patrols for 8 or 10 years. I presume I must have robbed upwards of 1,000 nests during that period. The smallest nest I ever found was 59 eggs; the largest 168. I saw but few green turtles on the beach; by far the most were loggerheads, with an occasional trunkback and rarely a hawksbill. I never saw or heard of a nesting turtle being killed during this time, or even molested; it was only the eggs that were taken.

Turtles were plentiful in Indian River in 1894, when serious turtle netting began. The nets were about 1,000 feet long, and were kept in place by stakes that had been worked into the bottom about every hundred feet. The nets were made of soft laid cotton twine by Mrs. Olivia E. Hutchinson, who sold the webbing to the turtlers

for 60¢ a pound. The mesh measured 22 inches, stretch measure. The nets had a cork line, but no lead line, and thus the turtles were able to rise to the surface to breathe, and were always taken living. At that time there were a dozen or more turtle "crawls" along the east shore of the river between Mud Creek and the Hutchinson homestead. These were made of small mangrove stakes, worked into the bottom in water waist deep, and were about 6x6 or 8x8 feet, and approximately square. The turtles were held in them until shipment could be arranged.

Two turtlers whom I knew and often accompanied were a Mr. Kimbrough, a Texan, and a Mr. Daniels. (I understand that a daughter of Mr. Daniels, named Ada, still resides in Ft. Pierce.) I heard Kimbrough state that he caught about 5 loggerheads for every green turtle. My recollection is that each of these men caught about a dozen turtles a week, of which two or three were green turtles. Some of the loggerheads they let go; others they saved and gave to the villagers who butchered them for meat. They worked their nets about twice or three times a week. The catches soon fell off, and commercial turtling in Indian River ended about the turn of the century. Mr. Hutchinson died in June, 1900, and Mr. Daniels took over his interest in the island's real estate and started raising beans.

Of course these turtle nets also caught big sharks. I remember some that were as long as the 16-ft. sail boat Kimbrough used. (This was before the day of the gas engine.) The sharks were usually dead by the time the nets were worked, but occasionally we had a battle royal with a big shark. Manatee herds sometimes tore up the nets, and big sawfish were particularly destructive of nets and especially profane when they wrapped themselves in many yards of

net. They were powerful brutes, and in thrashing about they not only tore up much webbing, but also were sometimes dangerous.

It should be noted that there are no river beaches suitable for turtles to nest on; they are too narrow and so low that the eggs, buried to the usual depth, would be below water level. I presume the females must have sought the ocean at nesting time.

I visited Hutchinson's Island this last week, and walked some three or four miles along the beach. I'd estimate that there are now about one-third to one-half as many nests as there were back in the 1890's. I didn't, however, see a single trunkback nest, nor do I know, of course, the variety of turtles that made the other nests. I saw, as the green turtle, loggerhead and hawksbill turtles make almost identical crawls. The trunkback nest is easily identified, and their eggs also are very large. I didn't see a single trunkback nest last week.

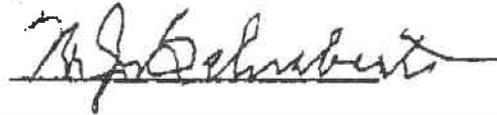
One fact perhaps should be noted: during my boyhood only the bears robbed the nests, and up to the turn of the century they missed but few. But this last week I noted that about a third of the nests had been robbed by racoons.

Perhaps I should add that I haven't seen a single turtle in Indian River since about 1909, when I saw a young green turtle, weighing perhaps 25 lbs., in Herman Bay. Another note: the sea weed in Indian River has changed. One variety of grass has disappeared altogether, and another has appeared. The water now, of course, is very dirty, and this dirt clings to the grass. The river used to be so clear that a dime could be seen 10 feet down, and the grass also was clean.

No doubt you know that loggerheads feed at least occasionally on Portugese man-of-war jellyfish; I've seen them a number of times going after the jellyfish when an eddy in the stream had congregated these floating beauties.

Here's hoping the foregoing may have some value, and if I can answer any further questions, I'll be glad to do try to do so. Also here's wishing you great success in your efforts to re-establish the green turtles. Again let me express my pleasure over the article.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "W. J. Schubert", written over a horizontal line.

WJS:S