

sufficient in producing enough food for their growing populations in the clearly foreseeable future.

In that case why is it that so many Pacific Island countries are such heavy food importers? One reason is that some imported foods are cheaper. Another is changing diet.

For half a century Pacific Islanders have been becoming hooked on imported foods that are killing them. Imports are, generally, cheaper and easier to store for long periods and eliminate the hard work of planting and fishing. Diets sickeningly rich in fat, sugar, and excessive amounts of other substances are saturating the entire Pacific Island nations with some of the world's worst rates for obesity, hypertension, diabetes and heart diseases. Also, with malnutrition.

Malnutrition? Yes. Pacific Islanders are starving to death not for want of quantity, but quality. Throughout the Pacific they are dependent on imported junk food because it is easier and cheaper than the highly nutritious vegetables, fruit, fish and animals their ancestors thrived on.

This is not a new problem. Health authorities have grappled with it ineffectively for years. Tonga recently banned the importation of cheap fat-laden

lamb flaps dumped on its people by New Zealand. Tonga hopes to cut a horrific obesity rate.

But perhaps island governments need to go further, perhaps by closing down the McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Coca-Cola and so-called 'snack food' factories they greet now as development landmarks.

Other threats to the status of local food supplies, and hence national health, are becoming evident. New insect pests and plant diseases are advancing into the region. Agricultural departments are waking up to the havoc that imported pesticides and agricultural chemicals and fertilisers are causing to local environments. Soil erosion caused by the unthinking reshaping of landscapes by engineers and builders is a problem everywhere, as is deforestation.

Yes, the Pacific's food and agricultural ministers do have some worries to talk about at the World Food Summit: Five Years Later conference. But it could be that the talk is too late. The food supply outlook for Pacific Islanders is not as sure, sound and safe as many of them believe.

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PALAU

Palauan women targeted in sea turtle education campaign

by Elizabeth Matthews, Palau Conservation Society

Women are a prime target in an education and conservation campaign aimed at protecting the endangered sea turtles in Palau. Men hunt the turtles, and the capture of a large turtle is seen as an enviable accomplishment. However, women play several key roles in the traditional and cultural uses of turtles, and may become significant advocates for turtle conservation. Recognising women's importance in the current high levels of turtle capture and consumption, Palau Conservation Society, Palau Division of Marine Resources, Koror State Rangers, and The Nature Conservancy are working to influence women's attitudes about the declining status of sea turtles.

Two species of sea turtles nest and feed in Palau: the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*, **melob**) and the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*, **ngasech**). Green turtles are captured for food and hawksbills are prized for their shells, but also taken in limited quantities for their meat. Females of both species are preferred because they are seen as having a higher

fat content and because of the possibility of finding eggs. Eggs of both species are collected from beaches as well. In 1999, a study noted that as many as 95 per cent of the turtle nests observed had been poached.

Sea turtle populations in Palau are under increasing strain. Key informants in a study initiated by the Palau Conservation Society felt that the commercial trade in turtle meat and shells has increased significantly in recent years. Turtles are still a challenge to catch, but motorised boats make the capture and transport of more turtles at one time possible. Turtle habitat, especially beaches, are under threat. Eggs are collected. Turtles are slow growing and may not reproduce until they are 25 or 30 years old.

Hawksbill shell is the source of one form of women's money in Palau, an oval tray called **toluk**. Women both give and receive **toluk**. **Toluk** is given to women by their husband's clan to pay for food preparation services performed for a

traditional custom. **Toluk** is made by special craftsmen who place heated pieces of shell into molds. Once the shell has hardened it is carved and polished. Hawksbill shells are also a highly valued source of material for jewellery such as earrings and bracelets. Wearing several turtle shell bracelets (**klilt**) was once a sign of wealth. Today, anyone can buy turtle shell jewellery. It is sold in many shops around Palau, especially those catering to tourists.

Large turtles are becoming scarcer. As a result, the **toluk** that is currently being made tends to be thinner and smaller than older pieces. Older, larger **toluk** are more valuable than newly made **toluk**. Although it is not possible to place a true monetary value on a traditionally valued item, some of the older pieces of **toluk** may be worth more than USD 1000. Women are keeping the older pieces of **toluk** out of circulation. Instead of giving away their more valuable pieces, women are buying cheaper, smaller **toluk** to exchange. They keep the older, more valuable pieces for emergencies, such as a big funeral, when there is no choice but to give away the very best pieces. If a ban was placed on the creation of new **toluk**, perhaps more of the older, more valuable pieces would be returned to circulation.

Turtle meat, especially that of the green turtle, is a popular food. It is seen as a high-quality, inexpensive source of protein. At one time, turtle meat was reserved for special occasions, such as the inauguration of a chief.

Today it is possible to buy turtle meat for lunch in local markets. Turtle is also served at more traditional feasts and celebrations. Although it is not required for these feasts, turtle meat adds to an event's prestige.

Women play a central role in the distribution of turtle products in Palauan society. They create the menus for feasts, they completely control the exchange of **toluk**, they wear the jewellery made from turtle shell. Thus, educating women about the status of sea turtles in Palau is essential. Bilung Gloria Salii, the highest ranking woman in Palau and sister of Paramount Chief Ibedul of Koror, has become involved in a community education campaign spearheaded by the Palau Conservation Society. As part of this campaign, chiefly men and women were invited to a talk given by Dr Nicolas Pilcher, a regionally known expert on sea turtle biology and conservation.

In a Palauan legend, a pair of young lovers witness the return of a hawksbill turtle to a nesting beach. The lovers first met on Ngemelis Island on a moonless night. In the morning, the woman noticed that her grass skirt had vanished from the rock that she had placed it on. She made a makeshift skirt, and the lovers left the island after agreeing to meet on the island again in two weeks. They returned to the island and were embracing on the beach when they were disturbed by a noise. They watched as a hawksbill turtle came ashore to lay her eggs in the sand. Wrapped around the turtle's legs was the woman's missing grass skirt. In the darkness of their original encounter, the woman had mistaken the turtle's back for a rock. The two-week nesting cycle of hawksbills was thus well-known to the ancient Palauans who began telling this legend.

Several women voiced their concern about the status and vulnerability of sea turtles after they had heard the talk.

One woman, Ebilrechebong Adelina Isechal, the second ranking woman in the state of Melekeok, said she would stop eating eggs and turtle as a result of what she had learned in the talk. Another participant, Honorable Laura Ierago, the governor of Sonsorol (a state that supplies a significant amount of turtles to the market in Koror), has begun educating her constituents about the long lifespan of turtles.

More women will be involved in the education campaign over the next several months. Sea turtles have been placed on the agenda of Palau's national women's conference (**Mechesil Belau**) to be held on 21–22 March. This annual conference draws more than 300 women from throughout Palau.

There will also be smaller community presentations made in states throughout the country from April until July. It is hoped that by influencing the decisions women make about food, **toluk** and jewellery, sea turtle populations will remain viable and healthy in Palau in the future.