

# Mass Turtle Poaching: A Case Study from Southeast Asia

Just when it seemed that conservation efforts were turning the tide against declining sea turtle populations in Southeast Asia, a newer and bigger threat than ever imagined has emerged: illegal and unregulated poaching of sea turtles by vessels from China and Vietnam. Turtle poaching has gone on for centuries, but in 2007, such a noteworthy increase occurred that we now must look more closely to determine the severity of this practice.

How much poaching goes unrecorded or undetected? How severe are the impacts on turtle populations? What drives this trade, and how can it be curtailed? What we know is already quite alarming.

In March 2007, Malaysian authorities seized a Chinese trawler in waters off the Sabah (Borneo) Coast. More than 200 protected green and hawksbill turtles were onboard, and only 20 were still alive. Just a week earlier, Malaysian officers had stopped a fishing trawler in a nearby area and discovered more than 70 green and hawksbill turtles onboard, most of them dead.

In May 2007, newspapers reported the shocking news that 397 dead turtles were discovered by Indonesian authorities aboard a Chinese vessel in the Derawan Archipelago in East Kalimantan. In a disturbing twist, authorities believe that the boat crew purchased the turtles from local fishers, because of the short time the Chinese vessel had spent in the area and the large number of turtles the crew had amassed. Also in May 2007, a mysterious abandoned vessel was found floating off the coast of China. Dubbed “Noah’s Ark,” it held some 5,000 rare animals, including turtles. This find exposed one of the most lucrative and destructive wildlife smuggling routes in the world—from the threatened jungles of Southeast Asia to the restaurant tables and markets of southern China.



An illegal Chinese fishing vessel with 397 dead turtles aboard was seized in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, in May 2007. The captain of the boat was later sentenced to 4 years in prison by the Tarakan Court in East Kalimantan, and 22 members of the vessel’s crew were deported to China. © WWF-TNC JOINT MARINE PROGRAM, BERAU

These latest accounts, however, are not news to Indonesian, Malaysian, or Philippine conservationists, who have been documenting turtle poaching for years. In June 2003, Bali police arrested five suspected turtle poachers and rescued 120 green turtles in a boat raid. In May 2004, Malaysian authorities apprehended 12 Chinese nationals in a vessel in Malaysian waters with 160 dead turtles onboard. In June 2005, researchers discovered a hidden turtle net with almost 150 turtles entangled and drowned. In February 2006, marine police in Bali, Indonesia, seized a boat loaded with 158 green turtles after being alerted by local fishers.

Similarly, Philippine authorities have apprehended numerous poachers originating from China and Vietnam. From as far back as 2002, vessels loaded with sea turtles, live reef fish, and sharks have been apprehended. Some incidents occur within areas of rich biological diversity, such as the Philippines' Tubbataha Reef Natural World Heritage Site. One of the most recent incidents occurred within the Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary, where a Chinese vessel was found with more than 100 sea turtles. The story, if one tracks back long enough, is alarming.

What concerns Philippine conservationists most are the large numbers of hawksbill turtles that are being landed by the poachers. Fishers on apprehended vessels have the skills and materials to stuff and polish hawksbills onboard so they are ready for the curio trade when the vessels reach their home ports. Hawksbill shells are also fashioned into a variety of items, such as jewelry, violin bows, and guitar picks, all finding their way to countries as far away as the United States (see "Trade Routes for Tortoiseshell," pp. 24–25).

Green turtles are largely slaughtered for their meat, which is kept in ice storage. Dynamite and cyanide have also been taken as evidence in the seizures, creating concern that poachers are not only affecting sea turtles but also destroying coral reefs and other marine ecosystems.

Given that most of the apprehended vessels originate from Hainan province in China and that China is a signatory of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and other protective treaties, conservationists are calling on the Chinese government to make significant and urgent inroads into curbing this illegal trade.



Stuffed, shellacked hawksbill turtles such as this one are often illegally caught in Southeast Asian waters to be sold as ornamentals in Asia. © VERONICA STEVANIA ANJANI

Research also must be conducted to fully understand the market forces at play in illegal wildlife trade and to design economic deterrents to such trade.

Beyond these measures, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations must strengthen its enforcement through collaborative initiatives that build on the many existing formal arrangements to protect turtles. Combating these destructive practices requires a multinational, multisector approach that will address this urgent, tragic situation.

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## Big Conservation Impact from a Small Island

On a remote island in Indonesia's Raja Ampat archipelago, the Ayau people have pledged to forgo the main dish of their typical Christmas feast this year and every year: green turtle.

The Ayau community of 2,000, on an outlying island northwest of Papua, Indonesia, is a major consumer of turtle eggs and meat in Raja Ampat, especially during religious and *adat* (traditional) events. Traveling to nesting sites at Sayang and Piai Islands, also in Raja Ampat, for many years they poached 100 or more turtles and the eggs they carried for a single religious event each year. In the photo shown at right, in a symbolic ceremony to express their new commitment to sea turtle conservation, the Ayau turtle hunters burned a net used to capture the turtles.

The local Raja Ampat government and Indonesia's national government have declared Sayang and Piai Islands as one of seven marine protected areas within the archipelago. These commitments by the governments and the Ayau community are positive steps toward protecting one of Indonesia's remaining sea turtle rookeries. In 2007, approximately 1,000 nests laid on Sayang and Piai Islands were protected from poachers.

The Ayau community, with the help of Papua Sea Turtle Foundation, Conservation International, and private donors, is now seeking a protein alternative for the previously relished turtle meat, such as establishing a small pig farm on the island. Taking their commitment one step further, the Ayau have begun reaching out to other island communities about also ceasing their turtle consumption.



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