

A message from the President of The Ocean Foundation

INTO THE TYPHOON

Saturday/Sunday 14 - 15 July 2007

I departed JFK in New York on a non-stop to Narita (Tokyo), having watched for an hour the track of a typhoon running up the length of Japan straight into Tokyo from Okinawa where it had done significant damage (Typhoon Man-Yi was the strongest typhoon on record to hit Japan since records began in 1951). Running from Southwest toward Northeast along Japan, its path would put us in Tokyo on the same day. But we won't be there until 13 hours from now, so our goal is to get to Tokyo and change planes and get out again before the storm with winds of up to 135 mph arrives. We know it is there and what to expect. The pilot predicts terrible turbulence during our last 1.5 hours on approach to Japan, a prediction that later turns out not, to be completely true.

We head North above Canada. Last time I flew this way there was more ice. Now it is an amazing expanse of open water, but that is a story for another day.

We are hugging the coast staying in sight of land across the top of Canada and Alaska before dropping south. Unlike the Leatherback sea turtles we are coming to Malaysia to talk about, which track perfect straight lines across the sea, commercial aircraft are confined to following the edge of land and the northern short route to the other hemisphere.

I am heading off to a sea turtle workshop in a country where Leatherbacks are reportedly already no longer visitors to its beaches. We'll be there to talk about creating a trust fund for the uninterrupted, long-term protection of its nesting beaches in the Pacific. Participants include international organizations, non-profits, scientists, fisheries managers and economists, and locals from the Western Pacific region. The workshop will review the biology and socioeconomics of conservation, as well as the long-term financing options for conservation plans. As such we hope to prioritize tasks, assign costs and build them into a plan for financing that is stable enough to ensure the recovery of the Western Pacific Leatherback stocks. The proposed outcomes for the meeting include:

1. A unified vision among stakeholders for Pacific leatherback turtle conservation and recovery.
2. An inventory of steps taken and progress to date in the context of the 2003 Bellagio Blueprint (the report from the last major multi-disciplinary Pacific Sea Turtle meeting), and subsequent identification in gaps or priorities for future actions/next steps.
3. Consideration of and recommendations for the development of a Pacific Leatherback conservation fund or other long-term financing strategy to make implementation of protection plans possible and sustainable.
4. A report of the meeting for wide dissemination, with a detailed strategic plan to support achievement of objectives as specified by the conference participants.

Following up on the 2003 Bellagio Blueprint, the product of a similar gathering of experts in Bellagio, Italy four years ago -- we now have a surprising expression of hope! The best minds

in science believe that it is possible that we can save these endangered sea turtles, the most endangered on the planet.

“Sea turtles are resilient creatures. If you figure out what got them in trouble, and deal with that, and your’re prepared to keep at it for twenty years, then the turtles themselves will do the rest.” Carl Safina, quoting Scott Eckert, in his book Voyage of the Turtle (Henry Holt & Co., 2006)

But before I get ahead of myself, I have to move through the cultures. First the subtle shift from DC to New York, followed by the dramatic shift to Japan (a change that is apparent the minute I step onto the Japan Airlines 747 at JFK), and then the second shift to Malaysia. The fantastic Kuala Lumpur airport looks new and beautiful, more importantly it smells like heaven! Glorious wafts of curry curl around you the minute you step off your plane.

We board a flight to Kuantan, forty minutes away to the north. This airport is decidedly not glorious—no amenities and no smell as good as curry. Fortunately, the driver is there to meet me. After a 90-minute car ride, I arrive at the hotel at midnight (my driver and I had a hard time keeping each other awake, and he hadn’t traveled 36 hours to arrive). Coming along through the jungle in the dark, we see lights in the distance and then, a sight that further befuddles my jet-lagged brain—the Colonel. Here in the apparent middle of nowhere, Kentucky Fried Chicken is available (for the staff of the resort, I later learn).

When I wake up the next day, I will find I have shifted again from the ultra modern city to an isolated resort on the East Coast of peninsular Malaysia. In a narrow sliver of land between the jungle and the ocean is our meeting site. We are at the Awana Kijal Golf, Beach & Spa Resort, a nine-story monster of a building, which conveniently has an ice cold conference room with no windows, just like all the others in thousands of hotels around the world. Kill the lights and fire up the PowerPoint. You could be in New Jersey. There has got to be another way . . .

TAKING A BREATHER

Monday 16 July 2007

I awake to a red glow of sunrise over the ocean from my window.

In the early morning light, I look out my window, down eight floors, and see giant snakes on the plaza. Between jet lag, just waking up, and early morning light, I am sure they are real. Three giant boas sitting on the square. Later in the light of day, I can see that they’re just art painted on the square.

We are in a deeply devout Muslim part of Malaysia. All of the Malay women who work at the resort wear headscarves and longsleeved tunics over full-length sarongs. The amount of ankle jewelry and differences in shoes are the only demarcation among the Malay women. The restaurant looks out over the pool where I note with some amusement, the odd juxtaposition of Japanese tourists wearing “spaghetti suits,” Australians in their baggy jams, and Malay women tourists in full cover. By the time I leave, I grow accustomed to the sight of a fully clothed young woman doing a cannon ball off the diving board and rearranging her headscarf when she emerges from the water.

Breakfast is a fun reunion with old colleagues from UCSD. The day is a free day to help transition to the local time zone. I spend it reading the conference papers and taking a visit to the spa.

The Taman Sari Royal Heritage Spa here is part of a chain headquartered in Jakarta with locations in Japan, Canada and Bulgaria. Go figure. All the staff are from Indonesia, staying here in dorms on a three-year contract. They have one day off a week, and can go home to visit family once per year. The current group has been here only 4 months. They are homesick and a little lonely. They feel they have to keep to themselves because the other hotel staff pressure them for massages or dates in their off hours. The resort is very isolated. No entertainment near. It took three months before they received visas allowing them to leave the hotel property to visit other parts of Malaysia. It seems like an arrangement of decades ago. But Suci, who fixes my bad neck for me, had jumped at the opportunity to see the world. She is hoping to be assigned to Whistler, Canada next.

Like her bareheaded countrywomen, Suci is Muslim. She is very concerned that I know that Muslims are not bad people, that there are only a few bad people who are fanatics, who are using the Koran to justify terrorism. She asserts that “eye-for-an-eye” is in the Bible, but is absent from the Koran.

To close my day, I prepare a handout for the conference with our suggestions on how a Pacific Leatherback Sea Turtle Conservation Fund might work on the grantmaking side. In it, I focus on nine preliminary categories of potential grantmaking: Direct Incentives, Indirect Incentives (“conservation by distraction”), Education and Awareness Campaigns, Capacity Building and Training, Research, Land Conservation, Policy Advocacy (for adoption of laws), Legal Advocacy, and Enforcement.

But I also note there are challenges to overcome:

1. For now, this list is just about protecting the beach and protecting nesting females along with their hatchlings (and only while they are at or near the beach). Thus, it is only one part of the life cycle threats to Pacific Leatherback Sea Turtles. The other threats, which must be addressed through a similar listing of fundable initiatives, include pelagic bycatch (the unintended capture of turtles when fishing for other species) and targeted harvesting, bioaccumulation of toxins, disease exposure etc.;
2. There is a need to fund and use a mixture of all of the initiatives listed above. None are a stand-alone silver bullet solution to the problem;
3. Per Scott Eckert, we need to think long-term (20+ years at least), and ensure a continuity of funding (sustained, reliable financial commitment); and
4. We need to be watchful for possible unintended consequences (too much money introduced into a community, lack of equity, harm to subsistence, etc.)

IT IS ABOUT THE BEACHES

Tuesday 17 July 2007

We began with the formal opening of the conference by the Chair of the environmental agency for the state of Terengganu, Malaysia and Kitty Simonds, Executive Director of the U.S. Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (WPFMC), and Kitty is a powerful personality with real dedication to ensuring sufficient resources are invested in the lesser-known fisheries of the

Western Pacific Region, which includes American Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, and other US territorial waters. The tuna fleet is probably the most visible of the commercial fisheries in that region.

Today's schedule is made up only of plenary sessions to lead into working groups on nesting beaches, coastal fisheries, regional efforts, and long-term financing options. First we get a quick review of all we know about Leatherback Sea Turtles biology, geographic range, migrations, genetic stock status, etc.

In short, by the mid-1990s we knew the Leatherback was in full collapse, racing toward extinction. Protection of Eastern Pacific beaches (from Mexico to Peru) appears to be working. Recovery appears to be happening. Here in the Western Pacific (Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea) the efforts to protect beaches, nests, eggs and hatchlings is not as mature, and suffers from gaps and interruptions in financial support. Dr. Milani Chaloupka (chair of the West Pac Sea Turtle Advisory Group) makes it clear that we are dealing with a vortex to extinction: no eggs = no adults = no eggs. Thus, Milani asserts, a major focus should be protecting the beach and protecting nesting females along with their hatchlings (while they are at or near the beach).

The other threats include pelagic bycatch and targeted harvesting. Some at the meeting (but not all) feel these are being addressed well enough through fishery councils and international agreements, including efforts by some organizations to move fishermen to use circle hooks instead of "j" hooks that result in lower bycatch of sea turtles, and a higher survival rate when they are hooked.

Interestingly, there is no real discussion on bioaccumulation of toxins, disease exposure etc. And when I ask Peter Dutton of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) why, he says he is not aware of that kind of study being done in this part of the world.

I learn that reversing coastal deforestation is one important key to saving the sea turtle. The lack of shade on the beach changes the temperature of the sand. It is bad for the sex ratio for reproduction (more heat = more females). And many just die in the heat. [Another place where climate change will be at issue over time!]

There is universal agreement that with some protection sea turtles do recover! This helps return them to their place in the ecosystem, and thus restores ecosystem functions (the turtles keep the critters they eat in check from over-populating a reef, for example).

The job of three of our working groups is to develop action plans, and estimated budgets to implement those action plans. The fourth working group, in which TOF will play a role, is assigned to look at the options for long-term financing of the action plans, specially to lay out a business plan to create a Pacific Leatherback Sea Turtle Conservation Fund (PLTCF).

All of our work is intended to be consistent with the four central themes from the Bellagio Blueprint: (1) the protection of all nesting beaches, (2) reducing turtle take at-sea and in coastal fisheries; (3) stimulating Pan-Pacific policy actions; and (4) encouraging the sustainability of traditional use of sea turtles. Go to http://www.wpcouncil.org/Documents/Blueprint_2003.pdf for a copy of the Blueprint.

IT IS ABOUT THE MONEY

Wednesday 18 July 2007

We wake up this morning to find that our meeting has already made the news:

Experts seek to save rare turtle

By Jonathan Kent
BBC News, Kuala Lumpur

Conservationists and scientists are meeting in Malaysia to hatch a plan to save one of the world's most critically endangered sea creatures.

Experts say there are fewer than 5,000 leatherback turtles left, but with swift action they believe that their decline can be reversed.

The meeting's organisers say there is a certain irony in their choice of venue.

Terengganu on Malaysia's east coast was once home to one of the world's largest leatherback turtle nesting sites.

Tens of thousands would come ashore each year to lay their eggs.

But no more. Numbers are so low that the state has dropped the turtle as its symbol.

The creatures have fallen prey to humans who either raid their nests for eggs or who catch them in fishing nets at sea.

Funding needed

Peter Dutton, the head of a US government marine turtle research programme, says it is a critical time for the leatherback.

He wants to see more action to protect their nests.

Scientists have already identified the most critical nesting sites and hope that this meeting will decide how best to put into action a plan to save them.

There is broad agreement that the leatherbacks' decline can yet be stemmed.

However, campaigners say that without reliable funding for conservation programmes, the task of ensuring the survival of the largest of the world's turtle species will be that much more difficult.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/6902048.stm>

Published: 2007/07/17 03:27:19 GMT

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However, we next learn that there is no money in hand to start the PLTCF as an endowment big enough to produce long-term financial support. At best, there is some seed money to get started from NOAA and the WPFMC. The sea turtle research and conservation community readily admit that they are not experienced in raising large enough sums of money. Their intent had been to catch NOAA when its funding was at its peak (this meeting was supposed to take place three years ago in Bali). Now we feel we may be too late. More than once it is noted that a half day less of the Iraq war would be enough money to save this species, and would engender improved relations in this part of the Muslim world. We were invited, along with a

colleague from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, to provide expert advice on fund design, management, fundraising, and grantmaking.

As we get started, we are briefed on the Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2004 – a US Congress established fund at US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) for international protection of turtle nesting beaches. As always, one challenge lies in the gap between what is authorized (up to \$5 million/year) and what has been actually approved by Congress (not yet even close to \$1 million/year).

The good news is that just about any relevant activities are eligible for funding, in nearly any country in the world. The USFWS Fund can do multi-year funding out of a single year's appropriation. In addition, while they cannot sign a contract, they can and do make multi-year commitments. While there is no absolute requirement for a match, applicants are expected to show a match.

At this point, we break into our working groups. Our group, the "finance working group," is charged with designing the turtle conservation fund. We are about 10 people with Meryl Williams of the World Fish Center as our facilitator. As we gather, I pull out the trusty laptop and start taking notes. The conversation continues through lunch, and then I pull from our past examples of business plans to make sure we are not forgetting anything. Scrambling it all together, we have an outline for our plan by mid-afternoon.

In addition, drawing from my grant list from my handout prepared on Monday, I quickly put together a budget template for the other working groups to use to estimate their needs over the next ten years (to help us know how big the fund needs to be).

In the evening, we pile into a bus fully decorated with Chinese silk curtains and head to Ma'Dareah Beach in Kerteh (about a half an hour North of the resort, and just South of a BP refinery). After stopping along the paved road, we switch to taking turns in all-wheel-drive Land Rovers to get to the compound of the Ma'Dareah Turtle Sanctuary. Here we are shown the new visitors center, and its displays and education programs. We come around the corner and see lines of chairs – and my gawd no – a PPT projector. We sit and listen to a lengthy, detailed presentation by the Terengganu State head of fisheries, who tells all about their work to protect this beach, the nests, the eggs and the hatchlings. Afterward is a treat.

Some of the eggs that were removed from the beach to protect them from predators are hatching. First a few use their egg tooth to break out of their egg (oldest children), and then go into a frenzy of activity that gets all the other eggs in the clutch moving and breaking open. Soon there are dozens of Green Sea Turtles, an inch deep in a large Styrofoam ice chest. The staff hauls them out the beach, and tips the chest on its side so they can scamper out onto the beach.

We know from years of study that sea turtles burst from their nest and head toward the light. Even on a dark night, this should take them away from the land and toward the water. Land-based light has been known to disorient hatchlings to their peril. In our case, a TV crew on hand to capture the VIPs visit to the sanctuary is calmly filming with his spot light on until all the scrabbling tiny turtles make a beeline to his feet. Finally, he believes the anxious center staff that he IS the problem and turns off his lights.

It is a truly wonderful moment, once the bright spot is off, to see them one by one turn toward the sea and without a moment's hesitation drive in and disappear. For the males, it will be the

last time in their lives that they will feel sand under their flippers. For the females who survive to pass the long lines, the nets and other hazards, this will be their natal beach that they will return to when it is their turn to lay their eggs.

IT IS ABOUT THE DETAILS

Thursday 19 July 2007

Slogging through the development of the details of the outline for a business plan absorbs an entire day. We do lots of side meetings to make decisions and check on points regarding financing, potential sources of funds, and different options for governance. By the end of the day we are exhausted. Mentally drained. But we have the rudiments of a decent plan.

But we are all thrilled to learn the hotel has upgraded dinner to a multi-course Chinese meal. Not another visit to the buffet! That was the good news. The bad news was that the dinner was set in the windowless ballroom next door.

In the evening, our sampan trip to see what is said to be a phenomenal display of fireflies in the local mangroves is cancelled due to rain. Although I really love fireflies, it is probably just as well. It has been a long day.

As this is officially a secular nation, and not an Islamic government, alcohol is served at the hotel we learn. It is just hard to find. It is not advertised or displayed and in all this vast resort, served in only one space. We locate the bar in the basement—beer and wine only, no bottles on shelves or glass refrigerators, everything discreetly below counter level—toast to a good day's work and call it a night.

IT IS ABOUT THE TURTLES

Friday 20 July 2007

Today is the last day of our meeting. In the early morning, we struggle to put the final touches on our documents, report back from our working groups and go into a final plenary to summarize our key messages, products and next steps from this meeting.

KEY MESSAGES FROM BELLAGIO 2

Experts on sea turtles, fisheries and conservation from 10 nations gathered to apply the Bellagio Blueprint for saving the Leatherback Sea Turtle. To do so we:

1. Agreed that a business plan is needed urgently to stop the Western Pacific Leatherbacks from sliding towards extinction
2. Determined there were critical conservation actions to be undertaken without delay
 - Protecting nesting beaches
 - Reducing coastal fishery turtle catch
 - Fostering regional and sub-regional cooperation
3. Committed ourselves to work together on conservation actions and fund raising

PRODUCTS FROM MEETING

- A press release
- Working group draft reports

- An executive summary
- FTP site to make PPT presentations available to others
- A formal workshop report
- A paper reviewing impacts of Bellagio - What happened between Bellagio 1 and 2

NEXT STEPS

1. Write the "Comeback Leatherback" Business Plan – by Steering Committee, using other resources by December 2007
2. Implement the Business Plan – Steering Committee
 - Finalize criteria for & select fund administrator
 - Raise the funds for the new scale of action needed
3. Continue/upgrade networking, coordination – using existing, and new networks
 - Reactivate and reconfigure Leatherback Sea Turtle working groups
 - Convene annual leatherback meetings. Make these inclusive, especially of local participation (with Eastern and Western Pacific active participants)
4. Encourage development of Eastern Pacific participation in the business and action planning
5. Priority to build local capacity
 - Make long term investment in the communities
 - Direct funds to local actors

We adjourn exhausted! The intensity of the week was amazing. Turtle people are almost religious in their dedication. It's hard not to understand why. I am overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the distances turtles travel and the challenges they have to overcome (most due to human activities) so that they can return to their home beaches to begin the cycle again. I have come to admire the sea turtle, and the leatherback in particular, the way I learned to admire the biology and behaviors of whales when I first started in ocean conservation.

My surprise close to the day is a call from the Spa. They would like my photo to add to their collection of "famous" visitors. Would I allow myself to be photographed they ask. You bet. It may be a minute of my 15, but what the heck.

BACK INTO THE SKY

Saturday/Sunday 21 - 22 July 2007

My last day in Terengganu begins at 6 AM with a spectacular lightning show over the ocean. A real storm is just off shore and it slowly makes it's way toward us. By the time I am at breakfast an hour later, the rain arrives. I foolishly think this will cool the air. The drenching is amazing. The temperature doesn't seem to change and the humidity goes up. Many inches of rain must have fallen in a couple of hours.

Unable to go for a walk in such a downpour, I spend the morning working. I take in a leisurely lunch, and then Mike McCoy and I head to the airport. This large jovial man went to Micronesia with the Peace Corps and has basically never left the Pacific Islands. He married a Micronesian woman, and has worked on fisheries management in the Pacific since he left the Peace Corps. He had no real background in the field, but he got in at a time when he could learn on the job and could now write the book on fisheries in the Pacific. As a result, I am regaled with stories all the way to the airport and during our transit through Kuala Lumpur. He tells me the KL airport is eight years old and that city is just like it. Clean, modern, and full of spectacular architecture.

I discover that the KL airport is also just a big indoor shopping mall. Everything one can see in the U.S., all the major shops and all the high end stores I could visit within a mile of home. Fortunately there are boutiques that feature some local items as well. And while shopping, I can stop by Burger King . . .

In the evening, it is time for the overnight flight to Narita Airport in Tokyo. I must say Japan Airlines is truly impressive. Clean airplanes, great food, and some of the best service I have seen. I have been personally greeted on all four JAL flights this trip by the head flight attendant, who has informed me how honored they are to have such a senior member of the One World Alliance program on their flight. Do I fly too much or what?

I arrive in Narita just before it really opens. It is amazing walking through a gigantic airport totally empty of people. Slowly the staff and shopkeepers arrive for work. Finally the JAL club opens and I can drop my bags and clean up while I wait for my long flight to NYC and then home to DC.