

# The Washington Times

## The Turtle War

By Richard W. Rahn

Published October 5, 2006

*Grand Cayman,  
The Cayman Islands Turtle Farm.*

If people were not allowed to own chickens and if chicken eggs and meat could not be legally sold, how many chickens would there be? The reason chickens, cattle, catfish, and goldfish are not endangered is because they are owned by private parties, bred and raised in captivity, and sold for commercial profit – hence there are billions of these animals. The poor sea turtle is endangered precisely because the global environmental lobby refuses to let sea turtles be commercially farmed and marketed.

Four decades ago, you might well have bet that Cayman would eventually be known best for its turtle farms, rather than as a tourist destination and one of the world's largest financial centers, but economically ignorant environmentalists, who tell us they love sea turtles, have ensured there will be fewer of them.

Sea turtles have been around since the age of dinosaurs, a hundred million years or more. The typical weight of a nesting green female sea turtle is around 300 pounds. She will drag herself up on a beach at night, dig a hole above the high-tide mark, and most often lay between 100 and 135 eggs at a time. She may do this up to seven or so times a season, becoming almost an egg-laying machine.

The eggs typically take six to eight weeks to hatch. The hatchlings first must dig themselves out of the sand, and then scurry down to the water without serving as tasty meals for raccoons and sea birds. Mortality rates are extremely high for the hatchlings through their first couple of years of life. It is estimated fewer than 1 in 1,000 sea turtles makes it

to sexual maturity. Yet, as many as 30 percent of 2-year-old turtles make it to maturity.

Sea turtles have great economic value. The meat is low in fat and high in protein, and is very tasty (much like veal). Turtle soup was a favorite of Winston Churchill's and millions of others. Turtle leather is attractive and durable. The shell has many uses, including jewelry, and turtle oil has been used in cosmetics.

Sea turtles, like many animals and fish not raised in farms, are over-exploited because no one owns them; and as a result, their numbers in the wild have been declining for hundreds of years. The turtles also have been suffering from a loss of habitat. Their nesting areas, tropical beaches, are also preferred by humans for living and leisure. Human activities, such as boating, fishing and beach sports, take their toll of turtle eggs and hatchlings. As the human population grows, particularly in tropical beach areas, the turtle is increasingly pushed out.

The solution put forward by many environmentalists was to ban any global trade in turtle products, which was eventually accomplished in the 1970s. The problem is the turtle does not recognize national borders, and hence protection does not work because low-income countries have little incentive or means to stop turtle poaching or more profitable uses for beach areas.

In the 1960s, several visionaries and entrepreneurs were able to see the potential and benefits of turtle farming. They established a turtle farm in Cayman with the goal of selling the meat and other turtle products for profit, while releasing substantial quantities of 2-year-

old turtles into the sea to replenish wild stocks. (If turtle eggs are incubated and the hatchlings are raised to 2 or 3 years of age, mortality rates are very low.)

After considerable time and expense (it takes a sea turtle many years to grow to maturity), the founders of the turtle farm proved the concept's viability. Unfortunately, by the time they were able to develop what could have been a profitable business, the endangered species act was passed in the U.S., as well as similar laws in other countries. These laws, in essence, prohibited the international marketing of turtle products which doomed the Cayman project.

Eventually, the Cayman government took over the farm, which it has now turned into a major tourist attraction and turtle research center. The bad news is that thousands of workers in tropical countries are denied jobs in what could be very profitable agricultural businesses, millions of potential consumers around the globe eat less healthy meats and the poor sea turtle continues to be endangered – all because of economically ignorant environmentalists and their political sycophants

We know socialism keeps people poor, but socialism (by not allowing private ownership) also keeps many animals unnecessarily scarce.

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