



TURTLES & TEA

on Talang Talang

Mike Smith

had spotted turtles during his scuba diving days and had even watched one laying eggs, but these experiences paled in comparison to what he recently saw on Pulau Talang.

After a quiet two days at Tanjung Datu National Park where we'd seen a beautiful beach, crystal clear water, thick forests, hornbills and lots of tracks in the sand, but disappointingly no turtles, we clambered back on the boat and headed for Talang Satang National Park. Our hosts assured us we would definitely encounter turtles! Access to the island is limited to paying volunteers and guests of Sarawak Forestry. We were indeed privileged.

Preserving Heritage

Climbing out of the boat into warm sea water, to wade ashore, we were greeted by Tony, the manager of the Turtle Conservation Station, then we were asked to assemble for a briefing. We joined a team of dedicated experts whose mission is to "monitor every turtle landing on the island and thus help preserve Sarawak's natural heritage."

It was clear that this was not going to be a holiday

in the usual sense. We were to actively participate in the turtle conservation, see turtles up close and personal, and in doing so learn about their life cycles.

We discovered that turtles may live to be 100 years old and spend most of their time underwater. Females start breeding after they reach 30 years of age and only produce eggs every four or five years that are laid on the beach of their birth!

Doing Our Bit

Turtles are vulnerable to extinction because nesting beaches are being used for tourism, poaching of turtles for meat and shells, stealing of eggs for food, entrapment in fishing nets and ingestion of plastic bags. Our mission was to do our bit to protect these creatures that even in ideal conditions have only a one in a thousand chance of survival to maturity.

Wandering the beach, swimming and snorkeling or simply enjoying a good read, we passed a couple of lazy hours before the temperature cooled slightly in



late afternoon. It was time for our first task. Putting on sun block, a hat and lots of insect repellent I was assigned to dig up an old nest in the hatchery to determine how many eggs had failed to hatch. Digging a metre or so deep into the sand by hand was hard sweaty work. The rotten eggs stank and attracted swarms of sand flies. I separated the eggs and established the cause of failure which was dutifully recorded.

Basic Accommodations

Accommodation is very basic on the island; we brought our own food, water, towels and toiletries and slept on beds or mattresses in a common dormitory. Washing and showering was in salt water or fresh water drawn from a well, one bucket load at a time. However, our guide Duke still managed to cook up very tasty meals.

Access to the beach was forbidden after 6:00pm in case turtles wanted to come ashore. However, looking through powerful binoculars we could see turtles mating on the surface and kingfishers posing on the rocks as we enjoyed the scenery and a cup of tea.

Lucky Survivors

At 9:00pm a mature, one metre green struggled up the beach and started digging her nest barely 20





feet from our balcony. Absolutely amazing! Within an hour several more turtle landings had been announced and it was time to watch the action. In groups of two we were led stumbling across the moonlit hilly beach, with minimal torch light, to see turtles laying their eggs. We recorded their tags, tagged first time arrivals, measured their length and marked the nest location.

If we thought that we had finished for the day we soon got a rude shock. Once the turtles had returned to the sea we went back to the nests, carefully dug up the eggs and reburied them in the hatchery. In the meantime a large number of tiny turtles had made their way to the surface from nests buried 40 to 60 days previously. We collected 300 in total and released the hatchlings just above the high water line so the lucky survivors, if any, could make their way back to breed 30 - 50 years hence.

Heading Home

Finally we could rinse off and go to bed, but were advised to be up by 6:00am if we wanted to see any turtles in daylight. I suspect my alarm woke up the dormitory, but I wanted to see these wonderful creatures and take their photographs. Four of the thirty green turtles that had come ashore at various times during the night were still resting after their strenuous labour or slowly making their way back to the sea, where they took a welcome drink of water and



gracefully swam away. It was time for us to pack our bags too and head back to Kuching via boat and bus.

The accommodation is basic on Pulau Talang and the sand flies bite, but it is a wonderful place to visit. Seeing the turtles and participating in the conservation efforts with Tony and his team was very rewarding. ^{AJ}

The Sea Turtle Volunteer Programme is available May to September info@sarawakforestry.com

Arranged by:
Sarawak Tourism

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