

Turtles display incredible adaptability in a changing world

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When I was a child, I owned a little box turtle named Spike. He gave me my first lessons in caring for something beyond my little self. Watching this creature carrying its protective shell on its back, part water creature, part land critter, it gave me a glimpse into what ultimately became a lifetime fascination with nature.

One day Spike disappeared, and I was dumbfounded because there weren't many places for a turtle to hide in our tiny apartment. Many months later, my mom was cleaning under my bed, and who do you suppose was sleeping in a village of dust bunnies? You guessed it! A little dingy but surprisingly no worse for the wear. He had lost all connections to any source of life support, so he hibernated until his situation improved.

Hibernation, it turns out, is natural part of the cycle of life for many species of turtle. Turtles have demonstrated an incredible ability to survive a changing world for more than 100 million years. As our only surviving dinosaur, turtles have endured mass extinctions, shifting continents and ice ages (not to mention dust bunnies!), yet continue to soldier on.

Turtles play an important spiritual role among many indigenous cultures. For the Cherokee, the 13 scales on the turtle's shell represent the 13 annual phases of the moon. For the Catawba, the turtle was Kaia, a deity.

The Iroquois and Lenape believe the Great Spirit created their homeland by placing earth on the back of a giant turtle, hence the name "Turtle Island" for North America. In some Plains tribes, a newborn girl's umbilical cord was sewn into a figure in the shape of a turtle to ensure her health and safety.

What reminded me of my own connection with turtles and turtle mythology was the chance observation of a mama loggerhead this summer, pulling its 300-pound body across the hot sand to lay her eggs and return back to the sea. I was smitten. My son was so mesmerized. He called her S.W.I.M. ("she who is magic"). It was a breathtaking experience, so much so that this summer I decided to produce a feature documentary about turtles.

It's miraculous how turtle hatchlings can rouse from their nest 40-60 days later, travel hundreds of miles to the Sargasso Sea to feed and find sanctuary, and if they're females, return back to the same beach of their birth 30 years later and start the cycle again. If that's not magical, I don't know what is.

Part of my fascination with turtles is how they've captivated man for many millennia. Turtles have been a symbol of wisdom, of longevity and of fertility for thousands of years. One would think that once they became a food source, they would be eaten until extinction. But the reality is often different. More than 5,000 years ago, in what is now Oman, sea turtles played a highly spiritual role. Green turtles were frequently found in graves with royalty, lying head to head with the deceased. Pacific Islanders considered turtles sacred and prohibited their consumption except on a limited basis during special ceremonies, and then only by royalty.

Things changed for the worst (for turtles) when commercial trade and colonization began. European sea voyagers often found themselves short on food when they arrived in the Caribbean fighting native peoples. Sea turtles offered a ready source of protein. Christopher Columbus' ship logs indicate that the only way his sailors on his final disastrous voyage survived was by eating the "tortoises" he found throughout the Caribbean islands. Commercial shipping of turtles broke the delicate balance and threatened their existence.

Today, many thousands of people spend a good deal of their lives standing up for turtles. I've spoken to marine biologists, fishermen, turtle patrol volunteers, native people and children, and they all have such a deep respect for the turtle.

It's not only because of their fascination with the species. It's also what the turtle does for them. For some, turtles demonstrate unending perseverance, not letting powerful seas or threats to their habitat get in their way. For others, it's the magic of a creature that can touch two worlds, the land and the ocean, yet seemingly live beyond both. And for many, the turtle is a symbol of conservation. When they leave their eggs behind on a beach and head back to sea, they're passing the torch to us. "Protect our beach," they're telling us. "Make sure, 30 years from now, there's still a beach for my babies to come back to so they can continue the cycle again."

Most sea turtles and many land turtles are endangered. Western North Carolina is home to the smallest turtle on the continent, the bog turtle, but it is threatened by the disappearance of its habitat to golf courses and farmland. If turtles disappear, they will not be the only ones suffering. We will suffer as well.

And that is the lesson nature ultimately teaches. We are all part of one connected web. The survival of one is the survival of all. The loss of one is the loss to all. How much richer have our lives become because they are here, the subject of myths, fairy tales and human inspiration? And yet they still have lessons to teach us, across the tempestuous ocean of our lives.

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