

From egg hunter to protector, Malaysian battles to save turtles

A red filter over a light to not disturb the animals shows a green sea turtle attempting to hide from predators after laying eggs.

Aziz Mustafa used to collect turtles' eggs from a Malaysian beach and sell them. But nowadays, he makes a living as a ranger protecting the creatures' nesting sites. His transformation is one success in an uphill struggle to defend the endangered reptiles who swim ashore to the tropical country from the South China Sea to lay their eggs in the sand. Several species, including Green turtles, Hawksbills and Leatherbacks, nest on Malaysia's coasts, where the spectacle of babies hatching and scurrying into the sea has long been a major tourist draw. But their numbers have dwindled dramatically due to worsening maritime pollution, coastal development, and people snatching their eggs, which are a popular local delicacy.

Conservationists have however been making progress. As well as persuading some people like Aziz to change their ways, Terengganu state, a major nesting site, has announced it will ban the trade in eggs. "The turtles and eggs are our national treasure," Aziz, 44, told AFP, after watching a group of the reptiles emerge from the sea and lay eggs on a beach on Redang Island, in Terengganu. "I feel I am their god parent and I want to protect them for future generations. It gives me joy to see the huge turtles returning here to nest." The 20-strong group of females came ashore at night, crawling up Chagar Hutang beach, with Aziz watching alongside several other conservationists.

'Voracious appetite'

They dug holes and laid thousands of

eggs, before swimming back into the sea. On the same 350-metre (1,100-foot) beach, one of the busiest nesting sites in Malaysia, baby turtles were hatching and scurrying into the waters. Humans are far from the only threat they face—monitor lizards eat their eggs, while many are gobbled up by sharks and predatory fish as soon as they make it

able. At the same time, Aziz realised there were more benefits for the local community in protecting turtle nests than raiding them, as growing numbers of tourists flocked to the island to see the creatures. "I realised that if these migratory species are protected, the villagers on Redang would be able to sustain their livelihoods," he said. So he started work-



A ranger showing an unhatched green sea turtle egg to volunteers.

into the waters. Aziz, from a poor fishing family on the island, remembers how he used to hide in the bushes by the beach and race out to grab the eggs shortly after they were laid, with brawls often breaking out between rival collectors.

The eggs were then sold to local traders or eaten, and were a key source of protein in limited diets, although that started to change as incomes increased and different food options became avail-

able. At the same time, Aziz realised there were more benefits for the local community in protecting turtle nests than raiding them, as growing numbers of tourists flocked to the island to see the creatures. "I realised that if these migratory species are protected, the villagers on Redang would be able to sustain their livelihoods," he said. So he started work-

ing for University Malaysia Terengganu's turtle research unit to protect the creatures, earning about \$400 a month. He now works with two other rangers and a group of volunteers to safeguard the eggs from poachers and predators like monitor lizards. "Villagers on Redang Island now enjoy a stable income from tourism as a growing number of people want to watch the Green turtles lay eggs," he said.

Centuries-old tradition

Mohamad Uzair Rusli, a biologist working on saving sea turtles at the university, agreed that giving locals a way to earn money from looking after the creatures was the best fashion to safeguard their future.

But he warned that without tackling the "voracious appetite" for eggs—consid-



A green sea turtle swimming in the waters off the Taaras Beach and Spa Resort on Redang island.



A green sea turtle sleeping after laying eggs on the shore of the Chagar Hutang Turtle Sanctuary.



A volunteer inspecting a green baby sea turtle, retrieved from a nest.

eggs of Leatherback turtles, after their numbers fell dramatically, but not other species commonly found in the state. However, changing a centuries-old tradition will be tough. On a recent visit, eggs were being sold openly at a busy market in state capital Kuala Terengganu, with buyers paying the equivalent of \$12 for 10. Trader Nor Jannah said business



A volunteer digging a green sea turtle nest for unhatched eggs on the shore of the Chagar Hutang Turtle Sanctuary on Redang island.—AFP photos

ered an aphrodisiac by many—the creatures faced an uncertain future. Licensed collectors are still allowed to operate in Terengganu, on the northeast coast of peninsular Malaysia, and the sale of most species' eggs remains legal.

But state authorities have pledged to ban the trade in all turtle eggs by the end of this year, following sustained pressure from conservation groups. Currently Terengganu only prohibits the trade in

was brisk, and brushed off suggestions that eating the eggs was a threat to turtles. "It is impossible turtles will become extinct," said the 32-year-old. "I have been eating and selling turtle eggs since I was 12."—AFP

Virus forces Nobel to cancel banquet for first time in decades

The Nobel Foundation, which manages the Nobel Prizes, on Tuesday cancelled its traditional December banquet because of the coronavirus pandemic and said the award ceremonies would be held in "new forms". This is the first time since 1956 that the lavish banquet has been cancelled, according to the foundation. The event traditionally marks the end of the so-called Nobel Week, when the year's prize-winners are invited to Swedish capital Stockholm for talks and the award ceremony. "The Nobel Week will not be as it usually is due to the current pandemic. This is a very special year when everyone needs to make sacrifices and adapt to completely new circumstances," Lars Heikensten, director of the Nobel Foundation, said in a statement.

Heikensten added that the laureates and their work would be highlighted in "different ways", hinting that prize winners would receive their awards in their home countries or at embassies. Traditionally, the prize-winners join the Swedish royal family and some 1,300 guests for the banquet at Stockholm's City Hall after the

award ceremony—held on December 10, the anniversary of the death of the prizes' founder Alfred Nobel. The winners, except Peace Prize laureates who are honoured in Oslo, also usually give speeches during the dinner.

Many of the events would be held under new arrangements because of the uncertainty around large gatherings and international travel, the foundation said. The announcement of the prizes (Medicine, Physics, Chemistry, Literature, Peace and Economics) would still be held scheduled between 5 and 12 October, the Foundation said. The Nobel Banquet was last cancelled in 1956 to avoid inviting the Soviet ambassador because of the repression of the Hungarian Revolution, Rebecka Oxelstrom, Head of Press at Nobel Foundation, told AFP. "An unofficial dinner was nevertheless organised, without the ambassador, in another room," she said. The banquet was also cancelled during the two world wars and in 1907 and 1924.—AFP



This file photo shows guests waiting for the desserts during royal banquet to honour the laureates of the Nobel Prize 2019 following the Award ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden. — AFP



STRUGGLING CIRQUE DU SOLEIL RETURNS TO MEXICO

Using face masks, sanitizing gel and social distancing, Cirque du Soleil artists in Mexico practise before a performance—a rare sign of hope for the famous Canadian circus company. The circus shut down 44 shows across the world due to the COVID-19 outbreak, furloughing 95 percent of its workforce and filing for bankruptcy protection. But—after three months off stage due to the coronavirus lockdown—performers in the "Joya" show returned earlier this month to the theater in Riviera Maya on Mexico's northeastern Yucatan Peninsula. Contortionists, jugglers and skaters rehearsed for what will be their fifth show since the end of lockdown. Attendance is limited to 30 percent capacity, or just 200 of the 650 seats.

"We're delighted to be back on stage during this pandemic, to be here with the audience," said Jamie Sullivan, the show's director of operations. "Joya" was inaugurated in 2014, in partnership with a Mexican hotel chain. It was only the

second of Cirque du Soleil show to reopen following the global lockdown—the first was "The Land of Fantasy" in Hangzhou, China. The Montreal-based company last week accepted a purchase offer from its creditors, which will serve as the basis for its auction in August. "Joya" involves 30 artists and

280 technicians in a theatre that was especially built for the show, inspired by the migration of the monarch butterfly. It is the first Cirque de Soleil show resident in Latin America.

During the lockdown, which lasted from the end of March until June, almost all of Joya's artists, who come from 15 different countries, remained in Mexico, said Sullivan. The Quintana Roo state, where Riviera Maya is located, is still subject to Mexico's maximum virus alert. The country has been hard hit by the virus, with almost 350,000 cases and more than 39,000 deaths.—AFP



Members of Cirque du Soleil train while preparing to resume presentations, in the Riviera Maya in Cancun, state of Quintana Roo, Mexico.—AFP photos