

Lifestyle | Features

Battle to save Panama turtle at center of aphrodisiac superstition



Lora turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) are pictured before being released on the beach of Punta Chame, some 100 km south of Panama City. —AFP photos



A member of the Tortuguías Foundation carries Lora turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) before being released on the beach of Punta Chame.



A Lora turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) heads to the sea after being released on the beach of Punta Chame.

The sea turtles of Punta Chame, a peninsula of Panama that juts into the Pacific Ocean, face an existential threat similar to the rhino and pangolin: human superstition. The eggs of the protected olive ridley turtle, illegally harvested from the beach, are sold door to door in town for 75 cents to \$1 each for their purported aphrodisiac qualities. “Especially men think that by eating turtle eggs they will have more sexual pleasure,” said Jorge Padilla, a conservationist with the NGO Fundacion Tortuguías which collects and hatches the precious eggs. “The eggs won’t help you. They are not an aphrodisiac,” he insisted.

The olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) is listed as “vulnerable” on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, with its numbers declining. Its survival relies heavily on people like Padilla, who with village volunteers collect freshly laid eggs and bury them in sand at the nursery. Hundreds hatch here each year between July and February. Within hours they are brought to the beach and released near the water’s edge by volunteers who look on with parent-like pride as the tiny critters make a frantic dash for the ocean. “We cannot just put them (in the water) because they have to go through a process called ‘imprinting’ (along the

beach) that will bring them back in 18-20 years to the same beach where they were born” to lay their own eggs.

Used for combs, clothes

Day and night, Padilla patrols the beach to scare off poachers. Other threats include stray dogs roaming the beaches for food, and eagles. Padilla repels the dogs but leaves the eagles as they are natural turtle predators and part of the circle of life. The turtles also end up as by-catch from fishing, and face threats to their nesting beaches from human encroachment and climate change. “There are many threats to sea turtles, both in

the Pacific and in the Caribbean: illegal egg harvesting, overconsumption of their meat, their shells... They are used for combs... clothing,” said Padilla.

Marine turtles and their uncertain fate are on the agenda of a global wildlife summit taking place in Panama City, not far from Punta Chame with its 500 human inhabitants. The gathering of countries under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) will consider ways to combat egg theft and trafficking. A working document on the CITES website states “the illegal harvest and trade continues to threaten marine turtles.” —AFP



Lora turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) head to the sea after being released on the beach of Punta Chame.



This undated file image released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) shows a mother and calf vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) surfacing in the waters off San Felipe, Baja California, Mexico. —AFP photos

Wildlife summit to vote on ‘historic’ shark protections

A summit on the international trade in endangered species will decide Thursday whether to ratify a “historic” proposal to protect sharks, a move that would drastically restrict the lucrative global shark fin trade. The proposal would place dozens of species of the requiem shark and the hammerhead shark families on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). That appendix lists species that may not yet be threatened with extinction but may become so unless their trade is closely controlled.

The initiative was one of the most discussed at this year’s CITES summit in Panama, with the proposal co-sponsored by the European Union and 15 countries. The meeting began on November 14, and ends on Friday. If Thursday’s plenary meeting gives the green light, “it would be a historic decision, since for the first time CITES would be handling a very large number of shark species, which would be approximately 90 percent of the market,” Panamanian delegate Shirley Binder told AFP.

Shark fins—which represent a market of about \$500 million per year—can sell for about \$1,000 a kilogram in East Asia for use in shark fin soup, a delicacy. The vote follows a hectic debate that lasted nearly three hours, with Japan and Peru seeking to reduce the number of shark species that would be protected. “We hope that all of this will (now) be adopted in plenary,” said Binder. The plenary will also vote on ratifying a proposal to protect guitarfish, a species of ray.

Heated debate

Several delegations, including hosts Panama, displayed stuffed toy sharks on



In this file a white rhino calf strolls with its mother in the African Grassland, at the National Zoo of Cuba in Havana.

their tables during the earlier Committee I debate. After the heated debate, the request to protect requiem sharks went to a vote, garnering above the needed threshold and calming the waters for the subsequent hammerhead shark debate. Delegates and direc-

tors of conservation organizations, who are observers at the summit, are confident that both proposals will be ratified. “We hope that nothing extraordinary happens and that these entire families of sharks are ratified for inclusion in Annex II,” Chilean delegate Ricardo Saez told AFP.

‘Extinction crisis’

The world is currently in the middle of a major shark extinction crisis, Luke Warwick, director of shark protection for the NGO Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), told AFP at the beginning of the summit. During the committee debate, Japan had proposed that the trade restriction be reduced to 19 species of requiem sharks and Peru called for the blue shark to be removed from the list. However, both suggestions were rejected. Participants at the summit considered 52 proposals to change species protection levels. CITES, which came into force in 1975, has set international trade rules for more than 36,000 wild species. Its signatories include 183 countries and the European Union. —AFP



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Musicians in French-speaking Africa eye global market through streaming

The wildfire popularity of streaming platforms has hoisted Nigerian and other artists from English-speaking Africa to unprecedented popularity around the world. Musicians from the continent’s francophone countries are now looking to cash in on the boom. Africa’s streaming leader is Boomplay, whose library of 80 million tracks is almost in the same ballpark as those of Deezer and Spotify.

But Boomplay’s big difference with the global giants is a catalogue that focuses intensively on African music rather than a broader range of genres. The app was created in Nigeria in 2015 and is now present in six African countries, said Paola Audrey, manager of Boomplay’s Ivory Coast branch. “We offer a very large library which helps you to discover many local artists,” she said.

Funded by advertising and free for the user, Boomplay has blazed a trail internationally for Nigerian Afro-pop and now hopes to do the same for francophone African stars. “At the moment it’s much easier to highlight Nigerian artists in the French-speaking world, but we’re doing some experiments in the reverse direction, such as the Ivorian rapper Didi B,” said Audrey. “There are small niche markets, and our role is to promote artists so that they can find an audience on a bigger scale.”

For industry experts who met last week in Abidjan at the African Music Industry Fair, the digital revolution promises glittering opportunities for West African artists. Revenue from African music streaming is expected to more than triple in five years, from \$92.9 million in 2021 to \$314.6 million in 2026, according to research firm Dataxis.

Digital dawn

“Everything began with digital platforms,” said Akotchaye Okio, in charge of international development for Africa at Sacem, a rights group representing artists. “Look at the success of the South African song ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Calm Down’ by Rema,” a Nigerian singer whose hit

has notched up 50 million streams in France alone, he said. Magali Palmira Wora, a francophone Africa specialist at US distributor The Orchard, pointed however to a learning curve.

“Artists in French-speaking Africa have to learn to put themselves forward on platforms,” she said. “Spotify for example has got an Afro-pop playlist—you have to explain to artists why it’s important to be on it.” Good exposure on the platforms smashes down the barriers to bigger markets, and opens the way to a career that is far more international than would have been previously possible.

“Wherever you are, you can listen to my songs in one click. With digital technology, access to information is much more extensive. It allows local music industries to develop and as an artist it gives us exposure,” said Ivorian rapper Suspect 95. “We no longer need to go through networks which made it hard to get my CD to this or that country.”

Copyright issue

Five countries—South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria and Morocco—account for 86 percent of African streaming revenues today, according to Dataxis. But the 400 million potential listeners in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds of whom are under the age of 25, are a promising untapped market. Ensuring that up-and-coming independent artists can make money from the dominant platforms will be a key challenge.

“Obviously, if you’re signed up with a major (music company), it’s easier—you are using an established network” for getting copyright payments, said Suspect 95, who is signed to Universal. “For independent artists, it’s harder, for now.” “The big platforms which use massively use our songs aren’t yet paying the rights they should in Ivory Coast,” said Karim Ouattara, director general of the Ivorian Copyright Office. “But we are in negotiations and should see progress by the end of the year.” —AFP