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TURTLE TAGGING AND INTERNATIONAL TAG RETURNS FOR SABAH, EAST MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the work of the turtle tagging project started in 1970 and discusses the results. Operations originally commenced on three privately owned islands which were subsequently acquired by the State solely for the conservation of Green and Hawksbill turtles. Initially, the project had to overcome native superstitions and later combat antipathy. Even though over 16,000 turtles have been tagged, returns are few and little light has been shed on migratory travel and its pattern. As with other turtle populations, the breeding colony found here undertake journeys over long distances. Minimum and maximum distances travelled by Green Turtles range between 259 km and 1,556 km and the times between tagging and recapture vary from 112 to 2,934 days. One Hawksbill turtle travelled 713 km in 40 days. Most tag recoveries terminated with 'the capture of the turtle in Philippine waters and further monitoring was impossible. There is no doubt that both species are capable of long distance travel. The turtles are a resource shared between Sabah and the two neighbouring republics. No males have been tagged. For the first time, recovery data on turtles tagged in the Philippines has been made available.

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INTRODUCTION

Out of the 7 species of marine turtles found in the warm tropical waters of the globe, only the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and the Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) nest in Sabah waters. The most important rookeries are on Pulau Selingaan (6°11' Lat., 118°04' Long.), Pulau Bakkungan Kechil (6°10' Lat., 118°06' Long.) and Pulau Gulisaan (6°9' Lat., 118°03' Long.). These three islands, the surrounding coral reefs and the sea between them comprise the 1,700 ha Turtle Islands Park, (formerly known as the Turtle Islands National Park).

Turtle tagging in the Borneon region is not recent. As far back as 1953, the late Tom Harrisson started a tagging programme in Sarawak, (Harrisson, 1956). Information elicited from that project aroused considerable interest in the nesting behaviour of marine turtles. Since Harrisson's venture, thousands of marine turtles of all species have been tagged in several parts of the world. However, whatever the species studied, the problem of limited tag returns is common to all research programmes. There also appear to be variations in recoveries between species and between populations of the same species (Huges, 1982).