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IJMH

The International Journal of Maritime History
2020, Vol. 32(4) 789–807
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DOI: 10.1177/0843871420973669
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijh

Maritime cultural encounters and consumerism of turtles and manatees: An environmental history of the Caribbean

East Carolina University, USA

Abstract

By the mid-eighteenth century, a distinctive maritime commerce in turtle and manatee products existed in the Caribbean. It was especially prevalent amongst English-speaking inhabitants, from the Cayman Islands and Jamaica to the outposts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the Colombian islands. Consumption patterns led to a variety of encounters between indigenous Indians, Europeans, Africans and Creoles. Commerce in these natural resources, especially turtles, grew steadily, creating prodigious consumer demands for medical uses, culinary and fashion trends in Europe and the North America by the late-nineteenth century. This study intertwines themes of environmental history, maritime cultural encounters, fisheries and food history. Topics such as indigenous hunting techniques, processing, transportation, marketization, utilitarian and luxury consumerism and evolution of social attitudes towards natural resources are addressed. It is based on contemporary sources and covers various aspects of the supply and utilization of these marine animals over the *longue durée*.

Keywords

Caribbean, environmental history, manatee, turtles

By the mid-eighteenth century, a distinctive maritime commerce in turtle and manatee products existed in the Caribbean. It was especially prevalent amongst English-speaking inhabitants, from the Cayman Islands and Jamaica to the outposts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the Colombian islands. Consumption patterns led to a variety of encounters between indigenous Indians, Europeans, Africans and Creoles. Commerce in these natural resources, especially turtles, grew steadily, creating prodigious consumer

Corresponding author:
Lynn B. Harris, History Department, East Carolina University, Eller House, 9th Street, Greenville, NC 27858-4353, USA.
Email: harrisly@ecu.edu

demands for medical uses, culinary and fashion trends in Europe and the North America by the late-nineteenth century. Crawford and Márquez-Pérez (2016) argue that turtle hunting was a central part of the making of the early modern Atlantic world. McKillop (1985) blends historical narratives, archaeological data and ethnographic accounts to reconstruct the prehistoric and of the lesser-known colonial exploitation of manatee in circum-Caribbean areas. In other geographic areas like the Gulf of California, Sáenz-Arroyo et al. effectively utilize diaries of conquerors, pirates, missionaries and naturalists to reconstruct the historical seascape with a variety of marine fauna categories, including turtles. One of the arguments is that disqualifying these historic accounts may lead to inaccurate management strategies for species that are rare today, but once were more abundant. Other valuable contributions include *Oceans Past*, which presents several case studies that juxtapose perspectives of historians and marine scientists to enhance understanding of ocean management. The authors include analysis of sources such as taxation records, logbooks of fishing boats and the paleo-ecological record to make quantitative estimates of marine populations through time. The topics range from fisheries and invasive species to offshore technology and marine environmental history. Every article highlights the complex relationships and challenges that communities experience in their interactions with their maritime environments.[1]

This article adds to these key scholarly works by intertwining themes of environmental history, maritime cultural encounters, fisheries and food history. Topics such as indigenous hunting techniques, processing, transportation, marketization, utilitarian and luxury consumerism, and evolution of social attitudes towards natural resources contribute to these overarching themes. The article is based on contemporary sources and covers various aspects of the supply and utilization of these marine animals over the *longue durée*.

Indigenous turtle and manatee cultures

Commerce amongst indigenous people dictated seasonal migrations, led to new engagements with trade partners and expanded opportunities for marriage as hunters ventured further from their home bases. Typically, their movements revolved around the green turtle's seasonal migration patterns. For example, starting in April, the first group of adult turtles left for the Tortuguero, Costa Rica, nesting beach. Turtles continued to leave the feeding grounds from May through early June. From June to the first part of August, turtling activities diminished because of adverse weather conditions, primarily strong

1. Heather McKillop, 'Prehistoric Exploitation of the Manatee in the Maya and Cirum-Caribbean Area', *World Archaeology*, 16 (1985), 337–53; S. D. Crawford and A. Márquez-Pérez, 'A Contact Zone: The Turtle Commons of the Western Caribbean', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 28 (2016), 64–80; Andrea Sáenz-Arroyo, Callum M. Roberts, Jorge Torre, Micheline Cariño-Olveran and Julie P. Hawkins, 'The Value of Evidence About Past Abundance: Gulf of California Through the Eyes of 16th to 19th Century Travelers', *Fish and Fisheries*, 7 (2006), 128–46; David J. Starkey, Poul Holm and Michaela Barnard, eds., *Oceans Past: Management Insights from the History of Marine Animal Populations* (Abingdon, 2007).

currents and high winds. The turtles began to return from nesting in late July and continued arriving until most were back by September.[2] Turtle meat was one of the primary commodities that ensured family kinship and solidarity. Miskito Indians relied heavily on turtles as a form of payment, or gift, in reciprocity arrangements. Debts and obligations to family members and the community could be borrowed against, or paid with, turtle meat exchanges.[3]

Children were trained at a young age in turtling techniques and quickly became 'very ingenious at throwing the lance, fishgig, harpoon, or any manner of dart, being bred to it from their infancy; for the children, imitating their parents, never go abroad without a lance in their hands'.[4] European explorers described a number of different techniques and strategies to hunt turtles common both to West Indies and Central America. Turtles were most vulnerable and easiest to access when the females came onto the beach to lay eggs. Miskito hunters hid nearby until the turtle settled into her laying nest and then overturned the cumbersome and heavily pregnant creature for the butchering. Both meat and nutritious eggs were assets from such operations.[5]

Walter Richards, Chaplain of His Majesty's ship *Centurion* in 1748, describes how the officers sent out a local 'dexterous diver' on a small boat who plunged into the water to take a sleeping 200-pound turtle by surprise. Clinging onto the turtle's shell, the diver rode the panicking creature to the surface, where the boat assisted in bringing both aboard. That one turtle provided food for four months on the ship.[6] There are other fascinating accounts of semi-domesticated remora, otherwise known as sucker fish (family

2. A. Carr, *So Excellent a Fishe: A Natural History of Sea Turtles* (New York, 1967); J. Parsons, *The Green Turtle and Man* (Gainesville, FL, 1962).
3. B. Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water* (New York, 1973); B. Nietschmann, 'When the Turtle Collapses, the World Ends', *Natural History*, 83 (1974), 34–43; B. Nietschmann, 'Green Turtles and the Protein Connection', *Chelonia*, 2 (1975), 9–14; B. Nietschmann, *Caribbean Edge: The Coming of Modern Times to Isolated People and Wildlife* (New York, 1979); B. Nietschmann, 'Conservación, autodeterminación, y el area protegida Costa Miskita, Nicaragua', *Mesoamerica*, 29 (1995), 1–55; M. Helms, 'Purchase Society: Adaptation to Economic Frontiers', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 42 (1971), 325–42; C. J. Lagueux, 'Marine Turtle Fishery of Caribbean Nicaragua: Human-use Patterns and Harvest Trends' (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, 1998); C. R. Lagueux, C. Chang and C. Campbell, 'Progress Towards a Sustainable Green Turtle Fishery on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua' in *Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation, 17 to 19 February 2009, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia* (Washington DC, 2012), 177. The Miskito are defined as water-side people with settlements almost always located along a river, lagoon or coastal beach. The group is scattered along 400 miles of Caribbean coast from Cabo Camaron in Honduras to the southern end of Pearl Lagoon in Nicaragua, and almost 400 miles up the Rio Coco. Their present-day population in Nicaragua is approximately 35,000, the majority divided between coastal villages (10,000 to 15,000 total population) and Rio Coco riverine.
4. William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World: 1679–1691*, Volume 1, John Masefield, ed., (New York, 1906), 7.
5. Crawford and Márquez-Pérez, 'Contact Zone', 71.
6. Richard Walter, *Voyage Around the World* (London, 1748), 220. https://archive.org/details/voyageroundworld00walt/page/n5 (accessed 9 March 2019).

Echeneidae, order *Perciformes)*, which were trained to accept human handling and then used to capture turtles. Turtle hunters deployed Remora fish darts that attached themselves to the turtle, tiring it out and forcing it to swim towards the shore to survive, where it was captured. Alternatively, hunters tied a string to the tail of the remora, and once it was attached to the turtle they would haul it up onto the boat.[7] There are descriptions of using remora fish for manatee and turtle hunting in other parts of the World from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, so this was not unique to Miskito fishers.[8] Numerous detailed accounts of Miskito 'Strikers' making special iron tools and harpooning both turtles and manatee describe how the hunters would go out at night in a canoe and wait to hear a turtle come up to breathe, usually at intervals of eight to 10 minutes. Turtles were audible from 30 or 40 yards away,[9] and visible when the moon shone on their backs as they lay on the surface of the water, which served as a signal to the steersman of the canoe. The harpoon was attached to a cord and the turtle would drag the boat violently through the water until it tired itself out and died. It was not unusual to pay out 15 or 16 fathoms of line, or to shoot a turtle in four fathoms of water swimming along the on the seabed, visible by the white flicker of the fins. Another method was grabbing, or slip knotting the flipper or neck of thoroughly pre-occupied copulating turtles.[10]

Englishmen expressed surprise when witnessing Miskito skill in both making and using harpoons. Innovatively, without an anvil and forge in the English tradition, they sawed up the barrel of a gun making 'harpoons, lances, hooks and a long knife, heating the pieces first in the fire, which he struck with his gunflint'. They elaborated on the techniques used for manatee and turtle hunting:

> The manner of striking manatee and tortoise is much the same; only when they seek for manatee they paddle so gently that they make no noise, and never touch the side of their canoe with their paddle, because it is a creature that hears very well. But they are not so nice when they seek for tortoise, whose eyes are better than his ears. They strike the tortoise with a square sharp iron

7. Jeffrey P. Blick, Amber Creighton and Betsy Murphy, 'The Role of Nature and the Sea Turtle in Prehistoric Caribbean and Lucayan Culture: Evidence from Ethnography and Archaeology' in *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Symposium on the Natural History of the Bahamas, San Salvador Bahamas, 2011* (Nassau, 2011), 161; J. Parsons, *The Green Turtle and Man* (Gainesville, FL, 1962), 85; R. C. Smith, 'The Caymanian Catboat: A West Indian Maritime Legacy', *World Archaeology*, 16 (1985), 329–30. Remoras are noted for attaching themselves to, and riding about on, sharks, other large marine animals, and oceangoing ships. Remoras adhere by means of a flat, oval sucking disk on top of the head. The disk, derived from the spiny portion of the dorsal fin, contains a variable number of paired, crosswise plates.
8. E. W. Gudger, 'On the Use of the Sucking-fish for Catching Fish and Turtles: Studies in Echeneis or Remora', *The American Naturalist*, 53, No. 628 (Sep–Oct 1919), 446–67.
9. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 454.
10. Richard Price, 'Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen: A Historical Sketch', *American Anthropologist*, 1, No. 68 (1966), 1365; John Esquemeling, *The Buccaneers of America 1648–1685: A True Account of the Most Remarkable Assaults Committed of Late Years upon the Coast of the West Indies by the Buccaneers of Jamaica and Tortuga, both English and French*, trans. William S. Stallybrass (New York, n.d.), 75.

> peg, the other with a harpoon. The Moskito men make their own striking instruments, as harpoons, fishhooks, and tortoise-irons or pegs. These pegs, or tortoise-irons, are made 4-square, sharp at one end, and not much above an inch in length, of such a figure as you see in the illustration. The small spike at the broad end has a line fastened to it, and goes also into a hole at the end of the striking-staff, which when the tortoise is struck flies off, the iron and the end of the line fastened to it going quite deep within the shell, where it is so buried that the tortoise cannot possibly escape.[11]

In a lengthy discourse about the differences between the species of turtles, Dampier describes how Jamaican sloops carried turtles from distant venues alive in their bilges to place in what seems to be a confinement area in the ocean made with stakes and wires. This ensured a constant source of fresh food for ‘ordinary people’.[12] The green turtle’s meat, in particular, Alexandre Exquemelin, a French buccaneer and surgeon who voyaged on ships to the Miskito coastline, described as appealing to the tastes of buccaneer encampments as ‘very sweet and the fat green and delicious. The fat is so penetrating that when you have eaten nothing but turtle flesh for three or four weeks, your shirt becomes so greasy from the sweat you can squeeze the oil out and you are weighed down by it.’[13]

The other popular food source was manatee meat that looked like veal to European adventurers, but tasted like pork with a fatty texture. One large creature was able to provide two tons of meat melted down in large earthenware pots and cooked with maize (corn). There was a belief that eating this meat rapidly cured scurvy and purified blood.[14] Leftovers from a manatee kill were salted and stored aboard ships. Other parts, like the hairy and thick skin, was dried out and made into walking sticks, horse whips and thongs to attach oars to rowing boats or canoes.[15] Miskito Indians used inner ear bones, known as stones, for both magical and medicinal purposes. Other bones were carved into fishing hooks, lures, musical instruments and magical charms against witchcraft.[16]

Incorporation of indigenous hunting techniques and culture into the food consumption requirements of European buccaneers and explorers

There was ample opportunity for turtle hunting Miskito communities to come into regular contact with shipwreck survivors, explorers, buccaneers and privateers. By the end of the seventeenth century, pirates prowling islands established lucrative and convenient contact with Miskito Indians, whose tools, hunting and fishing skills were in much demand to support them during their covert operations. They were attributed with the gift of ‘extraordinary good eyes, and will descry a sail at sea farther, and see anything

11. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 37.
12. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 106.
13. Esquemeling, *Buccaneers of America*, 73.
14. Orlando W. Roberts, *Narratives of Voyages and Excursions on the East Coast and in the Interior of Central America* (Edinburgh, 1827), 97.
15. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 35; Esquemelin, *Buccaneers of America*, 211–2.
16. Jeff Ripple, *Manatees and Dugongs of the World* (Minneapolis, MN, 2002), 99.

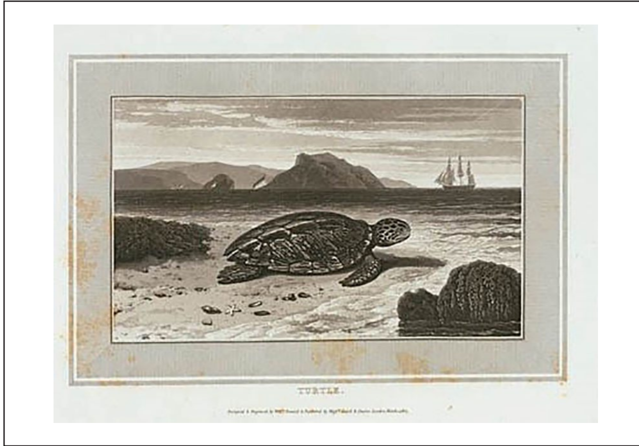

Figure 1. 'Turtle'.
Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-52a8-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99 (accessed 6 June 2020).

Figure 2. 'Abaca Tuaya; Manati'.
Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-1195-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99 (accessed 6 June 2020).

better, than we' (Figure 1).[17] Along with English privateers and traders, they not only exchanged quantities of meat, but also were known to hire or capture Miskito Indians to serve aboard their ships with possessions such as canoes and fishing gear. It is unclear whether hunters always joined the crew of a vessel willingly, and this may have varied at

17. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 8.

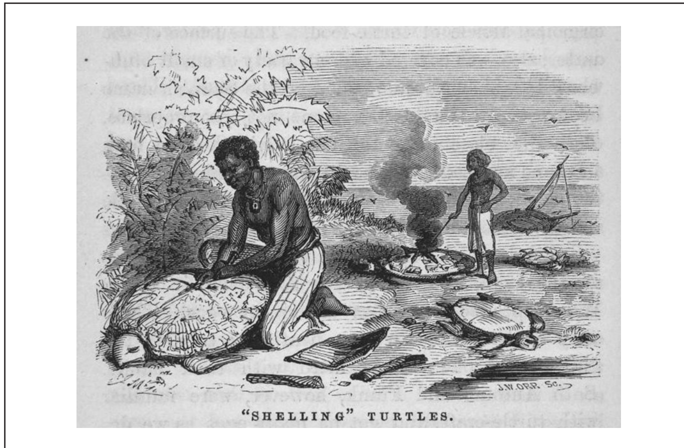

Figure 3. 'Shelling Turtles'.
Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-7395-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99 (accessed 6 June 2020).

certain times or locations (Figure 2). Esquemelin describes turtle hunters taken as prisoners; then, once captured:

> these men have to provide turtle for the rovers as long as they remain on the island. Should the rovers intend to cruise along the coast where the turtles abound, they take the fishermen along with them. The poor fellows may be compelled to stay away from their families for four or five years, with no news as to whether they are dead or alive.[18]

Were the turtle hunters enslaved and shackled aboard ships? Did they ever escape when the crew went ashore? These may not have transatlantic voyages, rather coastal runs, and it would seem unusual for a turtle hunter not to escape or attempt to escape a buccaneer ship (Figure 3). The answers to these questions are not clear in the literature. It is evident that buccaneers owned slaves. They were awarded as prizes or compensation for loss of limb in battle: for example, those who lost a right arm might receive 600 pieces of eight, or six slaves, while a left arm might warrant 500 pieces of eight, or five slaves. The injured individual was given the choice of a slave or financial compensation.[19] No doubt these handicaps would necessitate assistance in daily tasks and slaves could mitigate setbacks that were inherent in a buccaneer lifestyle. It was, as Rediker explains, a sort of welfare system to increase recruitment and loyalty amongst buccaneers.[20]

Pirates, privateers and explorers repeatedly stressed the dependence of Europeans ships voyaging in Central America and the West Indies on the skills of Miskito

18. Esquemelin, *History of the Buccaneers*, 72.
19. Esquemelin, *History of the Buccaneers*, 71, 172.
20. Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden* Age (Boston, NJ, 2004), 74.

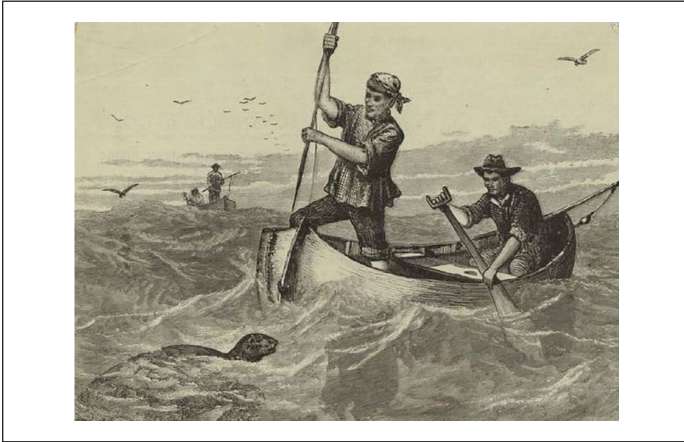

Figure 4. 'Central America: Spearing Green Turtle on the Musquito [I.E. Mosquito] Coast'.
Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-08f7-a3d9-e040 (accessed 6 June 2020).

harpooners for survival and lucrative commerce. For ship captains, they were valuable sources of local knowledge and much sought-after fishing and language abilities to negotiate to trade with other indigenous groups. Miskito harpooners served as middlemen in socio-economic engagements between various stakeholders in many capacities. Explorer William Dampier explained: 'Their Chief employment in their own country is to strike fish, turtle and manatee. . .so that when we careen our ships we choose commonly places where there is plenty or turtle or manatee to strike (Figure 4).'[21] In 1685, Exquemelin elaborated:

> Through the frequent Converse and Familiarity with these *Indians* have with the Pirats, they sometimes go to sea with them, and remain among them for whole years, without returning home. From whence it cometh, that many of them speak *English* and *French*, and some of the Pirats their *Indian* language. They are very dexterous at darting with the Javelin, whereby they are very useful to the Pirats, towards the victualling of their ships, by the fishery of Tortoises, and Manitas [manatees] . . . For of those *Indians* is alone sufficient to victual a vessel of 100 persons.[22]

The communities living along the Central American coastal rim, connected through colonial-era slave trade commerce to Jamaica, had strong links to British identity. Curiously, turtles were not popular with the Spanish or Portuguese mariners for a variety of reasons espoused by travellers, especially the English, who expressed strong cultural biases towards their Spanish enemies. According to some, these nations would rather have eaten porpoises and avoided turtles as conveyors of the pox, most likely caused not by the contaminated meat, but by lying with 'Negrines and other she-slaves'.[23] Richard Walter, voyaging with Lord George Anson in 1748,

21. Dampier, *New Voyage* 39.
22. Esquemelin, *Buccaneers of America*, 92–3, 220.
23. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 39.

notes that the Spanish considered turtle meat 'unwholesome' and 'a little less than poisonous'. He believed that it was a superstition created due to the strange appearance of the shelled creature, and prejudice created by their country against an English culinary tradition.[24]

With British efforts to suppress piracy and privateering, the turtle trade with Miskito people supplemented other illegal commerce, such as opportunistic slave trade and smuggling logwood. They established camps to cut the valuable dyewood, ship it back to Jamaica and then to England. Miskito Indians served as native coastal guides, traders and harpooners. It was in this way that the tortoiseshell trade flourished on the mainland as a sideline to illicit smuggling of more valuable resources. Ships headed back to Jamaica loaded with wood also carried tortoiseshell obtained from locals. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, Miskitos were economically immersed in the lucrative tortoiseshell trade, using it as an intermediary at the trading posts, clandestinely set up to smuggle wood. As the eighteenth century progressed, these operations became more sophisticated and involved a higher volume of goods. In 1780, for example, one such trading station recorded shipping four tons of tortoise shell along with three million feet of mahogany, ideal for shipbuilding operations in the New World. On an 1841 trade expedition to the east coast of Central America, Captain Richard Owen of *HMS Thunder* reported that the main exports of the thriving Miskito Indians were 'mahogany, dyewoods, tortoiseshell, indigo, and cochineal'.[25]

To keep turtles in stock for these ships and essentially ensure convenient harvesting, plus have a readily available fresh supply for ships, the Miskito built turtle 'kraals'. The word is presumed to be taken from the Dutch language, although the English referred to these stockades as 'crawls'. 'Kraal' is still a widely used South African term for a livestock enclosure, or stockade, and was likely derived from the Portuguese *curral* or the Spanish *corral*. The modern-day reference to 'turtle crawls' is perhaps a folk etymology based on a combination of the word 'kraal' and the actions of the captive turtles within the enclosures. These Central American kraals most likely resembled those recorded elsewhere in Key West and the Caribbean. These were square pens formed of logs or bamboo, with spaces to allow the tide to pass and flush freely through the stockade. They were usually constructed on the leeward sides of the island or in sheltered areas where there was protection from waves and surge.[26] Local communities with turtle hunting legacies, such as those in Cahuita, Costa Rica, still recall not only turtle cooking recipes, but building and harvesting at the turtle *kraals*; potentially, there is surviving evidence in the submerged archaeological record. At Punta Cahuita, now proclaimed a National Park, a group of local men operated what they described as a long-running nursery or kraal (*vivaro*), which was a bamboo stockade for the containment of live turtles. It was a 'living larder' that

24. Walter, *Voyage around the World*, 220–1.
25. Bird Allen, 'Sketch of the Eastern Coast of Central America: Compiled from the notes of Captain Richard Owen and the Officers of Her Majesty's Ship *Thunder*, and Schooner *Lark*', *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society* (1841), 77–88.
26. David Lee, 'The Key West Turtle Kraals Museum – But a Short Step Back in Time', *Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society*, 47 (2012), 81–8.

extended 20m from the beach into the ocean. They also built houses over the water that are still an important part of the historical narrative in their community music, artwork and theatre.[27]

Increasing commerce with North American markets

During the nineteenth century, as North American consumer demands grew voraciously, Caribbean coastal communities were increasingly active in the Miskito turtle trade. In the 1840s, mariners from the Grand Cayman Islands made two expeditions to the Miskito Coast. Their ships were designed as 'turtling schooners'. The construction was like that of the vessels that fished cod along the Grand Banks of the Canadian Atlantic, with trips extending from four to seven weeks, necessitating keeping the catch fresh and alive. While engaging with seasonal local turtle encampments was one option, another was to hunt for turtles independently. Crewmen hunted turtles from dories throwing nets over reefs to entangle their prey on the 'sleeping rocks'. Until they had a full load for their schooners, the turtles would be kept in kraals. By the early twentieth century, these Miskito coast turtles, notably from Costa Rica, were taken live by the schooners to US eastern seaboard ports like Key West, to supply Chef Granday's soup canning factory.[28]

On 28 October 1895, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* published an article entitled 'Cargo of Turtle Soup: Manufactured aboard a Schooner in the West Indies'. The editor described how the 19-ton schooner *Gracie-T* was filled up to the decks with a cargo comprising cans of green turtle soup, pompano and guava jelly. After cruising the coastline of Costa Rica, the crew was extremely successful in obtaining large quantities of green turtle meat. The vessel was innovatively constructed as a floating cannery, carrying a copper cauldron, kettles and a variety of food processing mechanisms, as well as the services of a professional chef to ensure a quality food product. This allowed the shipowner Benjamin Wood to avoid duties and undersell the local importers.[29] Whole live turtles were brought to city ports by other large shipping lines visiting Costa Rica, such as United Fruit Company, as part of a complementary cargo when bananas became an especially popular import in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 1920 *New York Times* announced that 40 large turtles had been brought live from Costa Rica in the steamship *Toloa*, to be landed at Pier 15 on the East River. The advertisement noted that the live turtles were well cared for during the voyage in wooden troughs filled with saltwater on the forward decks. Each turtle weighed between 200 and 300 pounds and was intended for Thanksgiving Day soup.[30]

27. Lynn Harris, Jason Raupp and Jeremy Borrelli, *Mapping the Cannon and Anchor Site Shore Zone, Cahuita, Costa Rica. Cahuita National Park Site Report* (Program in Maritime Studies, East Carolina University, Report submitted to Ministry of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications, Cahuita, Costa Rica, 2018), 52.
28. Alison Rieser, *The Case of the Green Turtle: An Uncensored History of a Conservation Icon* (Baltimore, MD, 2012).
29. 'Cargo of Turtle Soup: Manufactured aboard a Schooner in the West Indies', *St. Louis Dispatch*, 28 October 1895, 4.
30. 'Ship Brings 40 Turtles: Huge Hardshells from Costa Rica will Furnish Thanksgiving Soup', *New York Times*, 22 November 1920, 5.

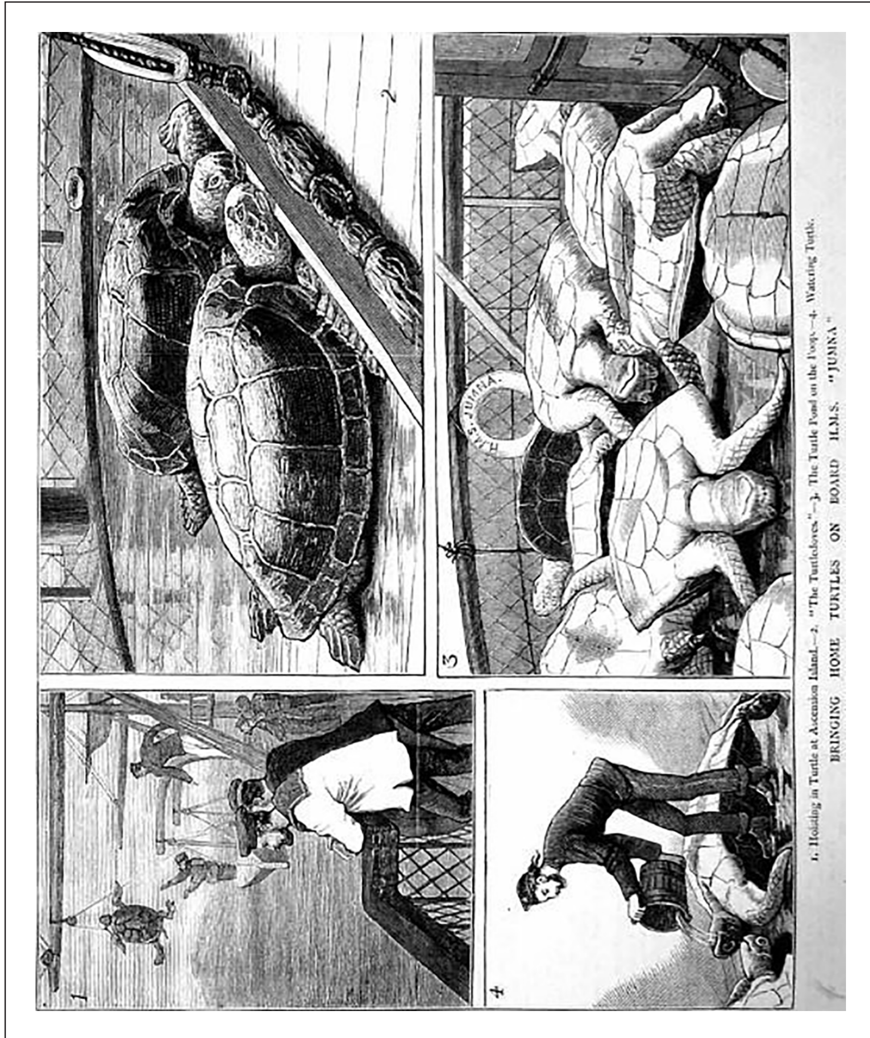

Figure 5. 'Bringing home turtles on board *HMS Jumna*'.
Source: *Graphic*, 4 October 1879. British Library, Newspapers.

SHIP BRINGS 40 TURTLES.

Huge Hardshells From Costa Rica Will Furnish Thanksgiving Soup.

The United Fruit steamship Toloa arrived yesterday from Port Limon, Costa Rica, with forty large turtles, weighing from 200 to 300 pounds each, which are intended for Thanksgiving Day soup. The hardshelled fish, as they are termed in the trade, were taken great care of on the voyage up the coast and kept in wooden troughs filled with salt water on the forward deck.

After three days on their backs the turtles were turned over and arrived at Pier 15, East River, yesterday in the best of health.

Figure 6. 'Huge hardshells from Coasts Rica will furnish Thanksgiving soup'.
Source: *New York Times*, 22 November 1920.

Newspapers reveal the public's concern with how turtles were treated, transported and processed, either by the indigenous traders, shippers or sellers (Figure 5). In one instance, a ship captain was charged with cruelty to turtles and reported to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Captain Cleveland Downs of the Ward liner *Saratogo* also unloaded 60 live turtles at Pier 15 in New York, leaving them alive on their backs with their flippers pierced and 'tied together in a cruel and unhuman manner and so to cause the said creature's unjustifiable physical pain and suffering' (Figure 6). This method of trussing was common practice on steamboat lines, but after this incident, the Superintendent acted to end this cruelty.[31] It seems that the Pier on the East River was a popular unloading venue because an individual, Mr. Blackford, operated a live turtle tank where he could keep turtles alive for one month. It was estimated the between 200,000 and 250,000 pounds of turtle were imported annually for the wealthiest families, who paid 15 to 20 cents a pound in summer and 25 to 30 cents a pound in winter. A whole turtle ranged in price from $18 to $40.[32]

Another concern was how the shells were removed from the turtles with 'dry heat', either in the West Indies or on ships. The turtles were suspended live over a fire until their

31. 'For Cruelty to Turtles: Ship Captain and Terrapin Dealer Brought to Book by the S.P.C.A.A.', *New York Times*, 24 March 1911, 2.
32. 'Turtles Good for Soup: Seventeen Specimens Arrive on Ship Vigilancia', *New York Times*, 27 August 1895, 8.

shells detached. Dr Albert Gunter of the British Museum noted that, at very least, the indigenous hunters would administer the animal a blow on the head to stun it before placing it in boiling water to loosen the shell. This view was not shared by all. In 1906, the *New York Times* published an article entitled ‘How Tortoise Shell is Got: Cruel Caribbean Indians Skin Turtles while Still Living’. Turtles were subject to heat, shells removed, and the vulnerable live turtle tossed back into the ocean.[33] Yet another report from a special correspondent described how turtles were used as a motor to propel dugout canoes. A pair of female and male turtles were imprisoned and attached to the stern and prow of a boat and prodded to swim. A tube was fixed in an interior cavity of a vessel for breathing and to feed the creatures fish. Their propelling service lasted almost six months.[34]

‘Its Flesh is between that of Veal, and that of a Lobster, and is Extremely Pleasant. . .’

Sailor, pirate and explorer reports regaled the value and desirability of turtle and manatee meat and by-products as cures for ill health, cuisine listed on fine dining menus and luxury consumer commodities. In the nineteenth century, turtle soup and dishes became wildly popular as high cuisine restaurants from Kingston to London, Philadelphia and New York added it to the menu of assorted gourmet delicacies, while social elites served turtle dishes at private parties hosted in their homes. A leading soup maker in London was John Lusty Ltd. located near the London docks. The owners proudly proclaimed to ‘By Appointment Purveyers of Real Turtle Soup to the Royal Household since the Reign of Edward VII’. Lusty’s ships brought live turtles both from the West Indies and Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. Starting in 1883, the main turtle soup cannery in the United States was Moore and Company Soup Inc., which was initially based in Manhattan and then later relocated to Newark, New Jersey. Turtles came on banana boats and dispersed out to distribution points.[35]

In 1943, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* noted that turtle meat was considered a common dish in West Indies, but a luxury in London. Ten years later, it announced that a 500-pound turtle had been served as part of ‘elegant entertainment’ at King’s Arms Tavern and Exchange Alley in honor of Captain Clive in London.[36] By the next century, turtle dishes drew a following and the meat was frequently listed on the Alderman’s banquet menus.[37] While imported turtle was welcomed with high pageantry, for some it could not compare to the taste of freshly prepared turtle soup. Janet Schaw, a Scottish traveller to Antigua during the American Revolutionary War, rhapsodized over the over her

33. ‘How Tortoise Shell is Got: Cruel Caribbean Indians Skin Turtles while Still Living’, *New York Times*, 16 September 1906, 15.
34. ‘Turtles Used as Motors: Official Gazette of France Solemnly Announces as a Fact’, *New York Times*, 27 December 1908, C4.
35. Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas, eds., *The Cambridge World History of Food*, Volume 1 (London, 2000), 572–3.
36. Sylvanus Urban, *The Gentleman’s Magazine, and Historical Chronicle*, 10 October 1753, 489.
37. Janet Clarkson, *Soup: A Global History* (London, 2010), 115; Rieser, *Case of the Green Turtle*, 30.

preference for eating fresh turtle found in the Caribbean Sea: 'You get nothing but old ones there [England] . . . Here [Antigua] they are young, tender, and fresh from the water where they feed as delicately, and are as great Epicures, as those that feed on them.'[38] Shaw elaborated on the way the meal was cooked with 'fine parts of the turtle baked within its own body' and served in the shell. A meal was placed on the dinner table in rows displaying local marine cuisine – turtle, kingfish, grouper and red snapper dressed in rich sauces accompanied by a pod of red pepper and lime slices.

English demand for turtle meat led to Gunter of London briefly opening a turtle meat cannery on Mosquitia in the mid-nineteenth century.[39] Although this venture was short-lived, English-speaking diners of the Atlantic world continued to consume Caribbean turtle. By the twentieth century, turtle soup was routinely served for dinner at the White House and at the most up-market restaurants across the northeastern corridor. Food historian and critic William Grimes insists that turtle soup was the only dish to rival beefsteak or a dozen plump half-shelled oysters.[40] These dishes took considerable effort, skill and time to make, and there was plenty of scope for a cook to ruin the meat. Turtle meat was soaked for three days, changing the water frequently. After simmering on the stove for eight or nine hours, the cook added sherry, lemon juice, cloves, peppercorns, turnips, onions, carrots, egg white and one minced shell. Both oysters and turtle spoke to the grandiose sensibilities of Victorian society and were designed to impress guests in a variety of forms. Mock turtle soup used a calf's head, a time consuming and skilled preparatory task, termed *tête de veau*, to imitate the costly green turtle soup eaten by royalty. Usually, turtle soup was dramatically served as the centerpiece of well-attended multi-course dinner parties. The soup was made from the turtle's head, the belly was boiled and the back roasted, to serve separately. Even the turtle fins, baked in a rich sauce, were served in separate small dishes. Three hundred years after the arrival of European explorers and settlers, the turtle, like other New World animals, became a quintessential Caribbean commodity for the Victorian elite.[41]

Not reaching delicacy status on menus, Europeans found manatee provided a great deal of tasty meat, as well as fat for cooking. An average manatee then weighed 500–800 pounds, although some were reportedly from 1,200–1,500 pounds. Although sometimes eaten raw, Manatee meat was more commonly preserved by salting and sun-drying in strips.[42] The French considered it a worthy substitute for butter and sent it to colonies where it was used in soups, fracassees and pasteries. It was described in one newspaper article as 'very much like the best young beef (Figure 7). It would be worthwhile to rear

38. Janet Schaw, *The Journal of a Lady of Quality* (New Haven, CT, 1923), 95.
39. Charles Napier Bell, *Tangweera: Life and Adventures Among Gentle Savages* (Austin, TX, 1989 [1899]), 40.
40. William Grimes, *Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York* (New York, 2009), 80; Paul Freedman, 'American Restaurants and Cuisine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *New England Quarterly*, 84 (March 2011), 5, 10.
41. Anna Selby, *Victorian Christmas* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, United Kingdom, 2008).
42. Orlando W. Roberts, *Narratives of Voyages and Excursions on the East Coast and in the Interior of Central America* (Edinburgh, 1827), 97; Samuel Bard and Ephraim George Squier, *Waikna; or Adventures on the Miskito Shore* (New York, 1855), 132; Thomas Young, *Narrative of a Residence on the Miskito Shore: With an Account of Truxillo, and the Adjacent Islands of Bonacca and Roatan: And a Vocabulary of the Mosquitian Language*, second edition (London, 1847), 104.

Figure 7. 'Decapitating a turtle at a Paris restaurant'.
Source: Photograph from G. Augustus Sala, *Paris Herself Again in 1878-9*. 6th edition (London, 1882).

flocks of these animals within closed inlets of the sea.'[43] It was highly regarded as a miraculous cure for scurvy, advertisements claiming:

> This being a most excellent food. Person subject to being afflicted by scorbutic or scrofulous complaints find speedy relief; by using it freely their blood is said to become purified and the virulence of the complaint is thrown to the surface of the body, and quickly disappears. . .[44]

A variety of other medicinal uses included rubbing on sore joints for back pain and arthritis, healing constipation and boiling to mix with rum as a cure for asthma. Eating male genitalia cured impotence. Burnt manatee bone ashes were applied to insect bites, lung ailments, ulcers and relief for women during menstruation.

Consumerism and non-food markets

Turtle shell was a popular material for accessories throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1867 and 1898, *Harper's Bazaar* reached a high point in consumer sales as a source for high fashion instruction for men and women. The goal was to serve as 'a repository of Fashion, Pleasure, and Instruction', and it exposed American women to seductive glimpses of the very latest European and American fashions, in carefully detailed engravings. Amongst these are clues about the use of turtle shell especially for jewellery, hair bands and a variety of ornate clips and combs.[45] Fans

43. 'The Dugong', *Grenada Free Press and Weekly Gazette*, 10 September 1828, 5.
44. 'Manatees', *Grenada Free Press and Weekly Gazette*, 19 March 1828, 3.
45. Stella Blum, *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazaar, 1867–1898* (New York, 1974), 37, 191.

were important and indispensable fashion commodities for the aspiring middle classes. Many were intricately designed works of art. A woman's status was represented by the fan she owned, ranging from hand-painted versions to those inlaid with mother of pearl, to ivory or turtle shell. The hawksbill turtle carapace, in particular, was utilized for making fan sticks and guards, often inlaid with silver or silver-gilt. The plates of the shell overlapped like roof tiles, and the finished product was light, strong and flexible.[46]

Other uses of turtle shell beyond feminine accessories include boxes, cigarette holders, dog collars, dressing table sets and traveling boxes, canes, card cases, necessaires and étui, glasses and lorgnettes. In 1882, the *Louisville Courier Journal* candidly called an article 'Combs Worn Amongst Lovely Ringlets once Burned from the Backs of Tortoises', inferring that everyone knew that so-called 'tortoise-shell' *actually* came from turtles. It describes dealers in Boston, New York and Philadelphia who supplied these desirable accessories that 'no lady has any right to be without'[47] Advertisements in newspapers showcase a variety of toiletries for both men and women, such as the '12-piece Du Barry' toilet set with matching shell combs, brushes, jewellery boxes, trays, mirrors and manicure instruments.[48] By the first decade of the 1900s, turtle shell began to supplant ivory, which was then 'thrust into the background', as a popular fashion material. *The Globe's* editor enthused that even grandmothers delighted in hair ornaments like pins and barrettes for both day and nightwear heavily carved and inlaid with silver. Fathers, men, and fiancés favoured shell clothes brushes, military brushes, cigarette cases, pen holders and stamp boxes.[49] In 1925, the *New York Times* observed that new ranges of fashion goods made with turtle shell now abounded in Paris, replacing even gold and silver in popularity. Not only sets of toiletries, but also several new styles of bags 'that had created rather a sensational impression'. These large, colourful floral bags, made by the house of Moulieries, were gathered in the top with shell inlaid with gold.[50]

The National Art Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum collection includes a tortoise shell book cover for a volume containing poems and songs dating to 1658. It resembles a leather book cover with a figurative centerpiece, floral borders, four silver gilt engraved corner pieces with matching pin-style clasps and hinges. Tortoise shell became popular for religious texts and gift books in the 17th and 18th century, and later as bindings for wealthy Victorian book buyers.[51] Winterthur Museum has seventeenth-century tortoise shell combs in a collection of Jamaican artifacts described as combining old World material with New World designs in a well-illustrated article by Donald F. Johnson. These were Jamaican artifacts brought back to Britain as exotic mementos as symbols of wealth, status and travel. It is speculated that Jamaica was centrally located

46. Pauline Webber, 'The Conservation of Fans', *The Paper Conservator*, 8 (1984), 40–58.
47. 'Shell Jewelry: Combs Worn Among Lovely Ringlets Once Burned from Backs of Turtles', *Louisville Courier Journal*, 19 November 1882, 9.
48. 'Display Ad. 4: This Twelve Piece "Du Barry"', *New York Times*, 5 December 1923, 5.
49. 'The Vogue of Tortoise Shell', *The Globe*, 13 May 1912, 5.
50. 'Novelties: Tortoise Shell and Ivory Used as Adornments', *New York Times*, 6 September 1925, 10.
51. Karin Vidler, 'Conservation of a book cover', *Conservation Journal*, 50 (Summer 2005). http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/conservation-journal/issue-50/conservation-of-a-tortoiseshell-book-cover/ (accessed 19 November 2020).

relative to three major turtle hunting grounds in the seventeenth-century Caribbean, namely the Bahamas to the north, the Cayman Islands to the northwest, and the Miskito Coast to the south-southwest.[52]

Walking canes, like fans or hair combs for women, were symbols of wealth and status for men. A gentleman would use an ordinary cane for everyday activities and formal engagements and occasions, a cane with intricate decorations made from exotic materials. An auctioneer lists an:

> Exquisite walking stick, circa 1820, crafted of tortoiseshell, among the most luxurious of antique canes, tortoiseshell walking sticks are remarkably rare due to their frailty and difficulty to make, from the shell of the Caretta turtle, very few examples of this art form survive today, an engraved handle of yellow gold caps this walking stick. . .[53]

Manatee products were associated with utilitarian rather than luxury consumer goods. For example, oil for lanterns, pitch to caulk boats, wrappings, mats and shields strong enough to resist shot and arrows. The tough hide of a manatee was widely used by the British, notably to make horsewhips, straps for fastening oars to their boats, walking stick and boot soles.[54] There is a description of how quartermasters of vessels could flog their Miskito crew ‘with a strap made from the hide of a mantee’.[55] Newspapers also describe an incident in West Indies where an Indian woman had ‘a cruel punishment inflicted on her with those straps of manatee leather, which serve for whips’.[56]

Conclusion: From exploitation to environmental initiatives

The use and exploitation of manatee and turtle products reveal historic cross-cultural values about a plethora of perceived benefits, both personal and commercial. There is potential for further in-depth socio-economic studies encompassing health, fashion, diet, handicrafts and clothing using these products in the larger context of the Atlantic World. Research in environmental history continues to explore the ecological impacts of commercial hunting enterprises on the turtle populations in the area. Contemporary stakeholder viewpoints are providing qualitative and quantitative data on cultural behaviour and belief systems regarding turtle and turtle egg consumption and commercialism. Each Caribbean town in a turtle nesting area likely has a history of humans engaging with

52. Donald F. Johnson, ‘From the Collection: Combing the Roots of Colonialism: Jamaican Tortoiseshell Combs and Social Status, 1655–1692’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 43 (Winter 2009), 313–34.
53. Antique tortoise shell walking stick, Live Auctioneers website, https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/39202557_antique-tortoise-shell-walking-stick, (accessed 9 March 2019).
54. Dampier, *New Voyage*, 33; Thomas William Francis Gann, *Mystery Cities: Exploration and Adventure in Lubaantun* (London, 1925), 1–20. Note images of Manatee skinning and meat processing in this source; Esquemeling, *Buccaneers of America*, 227.
55. Thomas Young, *Narrative of a Residence on the Miskito Shore, During the Years 1839, 1840, & 1841: With an Account of Truxillo, and the Adjacent Islands of Bonacca and Roatan* (London, 1842), 128.
56. ‘Material Affection’, *Royale Gazette*, 23 February 1822, 6.

wildlife. A first-hand account of daily life in a twentieth-century turtle dependent community is *Turtle Bogue: Afro-Caribbean Life and Culture in a Costa Rican Village* by Harry G. Lefever (1992). It details nine months of fieldwork experience living in the community to collect oral histories. In 2009, researchers conducted a study on the consumptive and non-consumptive use of sea turtles in nesting areas in three study areas of Costa Rica with a view to developing suitable and sustainable management strategies. Manatees are today a threatened species throughout the Caribbean basin partially due to historic hunting practices, but also increased human activity, agro-chemicals, persistent poaching and boaters in their nearshore habitats. In the 1970s, hunters in Tortuguero (191km north of Cahuita on the coast) were still killing off manatees. In 2014, the Costa Rican Legislature passed protective legislation and declared the manatee the national symbol of marine fauna in Costa Rica.[57]

Globally, manatees receive protected status under the IUCN Red List and are listed as vulnerable. With the adoption of Cartagena's Convention Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW 1990), manatees and the rest of marine mammals in the region were identified as requiring total protection. In 1995, Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under the framework of SPAW, the first Regional Management Plan for the species was developed.[58]

Turtle and manatee hunting, although the former is still an important part of the historical identity of the community, has been replaced by active turtle sightseeing tourism and environmental initiatives. Latin American Sea Turtles (LAST) conducts a variety of conservation initiatives. The group monitors the beach during nesting season, they collect scientific data and relocates, if necessary, the nests at high risk into safer areas to minimize human threats and sea turtle mortality. Thus, their project goal is to formulate strategies that help to identify the condition of sea turtle populations off Costa Rica, as well as to contribute in decision making for a more effective sea turtle conservation management in the long term.[59]

ORCID iD

Lynn B. Harris https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2220-8772

57. Katherine Hart, Tim Gray and Selina Stead, 'Consumptive Versus Non-consumptive Use of Sea Turtles? Stakeholder Perceptions about Sustainable Use in Three Communities near Cahuita National Park, Costa Rica', *Marine Policy*, 42 (November 2013), 236–44. 'The Plight of the Costa Rican Manatee', *The Tico Times*, 21 July 2014, http://www.ticotimes.net/2014/07/21/the-plight-of-the-costa-rican-manatee (accessed 9 March 2019).
58. Ester Quintana-Rizzo and John E. Reynolds III, 'Regional Management Plan for the West Indian Manatee', *CEP Technical Report 48* (2010), Caribbean Environment Programme, Jamaica, https://www.fws.gov/caribbean/PDF/ManateeManagementPlan.pdf (accessed 2 June 2020).
59. LAST (Latin American Sea Turtles) Association, http://www.latinamericanseaturtles.com/ (accessed 14 November 2020).

Author biography

Lynn Harris is an Associate Professor in the Program of Maritime Studies in the History Department at East Carolina University. Currently Harris serves as Co-Director of the Coastal and Marine Interdisciplinary Program. She specialized in Archaeology and African Studies at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, Maritime History and Archaeology at East Carolina University in North Carolina, and in Historic Preservation and Colonial History at University of South Carolina. She has authored *Patroons and Periaguas: Enslaved Watermen of the South Carolina Lowcountry* (2015), and edited a collaborative volume, *Seaports and Sea Power: African Maritime Landscapes* (2017). Her journal articles include 'African Canoe to Plantation Crew: Tracing African Memory and Legacy', in *Coriolis: Interdisciplinary Journal of Maritime Studies* (2014), which won the annual award for best article. She has won several awards for fieldwork photography at the Society for Historical Archaeology and recently served as a consultant for National Geographic on slave ship history in *Drain the Ocean* series. Harris teaches courses in underwater archaeology methods, maritime material culture, maritime landscapes, watercraft history and coastal cultural resource management.