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Literature and Conservation: “The Turtle”, A Short Story by the Brazilian Writer Rubem Braga

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"The Turtle" (original title in Portuguese: "A Tartaruga"; Braga 1960) is a short story written in 1959 by the Brazilian journalist and writer Rubem Braga. In the text, "Copacabana" is one of Rio de Janeiro's seaside districts, where the world-famous Copacabana Beach is located, and "Cachoeiro" is short for Cachoeiro de Itapemirim, the author's native city in the state of Espírito Santo.

The Turtle

Copacabana dwellers, buy your fish at Bolivar Fish Market, 70 Bolivar Street, owned by Mr. Francisco Mandarino. Because it happens that he is a good man.

The fact is that he was sent a turtle of about 150 kilos, two meters long and (it is said) 200 years old, and he displayed it in his fish market for three days and he did not want to sell it; and he took it up to the beach, and released it into the sea.

There was a poet sleeping within the merchant, and he revered life and freedom in the image of a turtle.

Never kill a turtle.

Once, at my father's house, we killed a turtle. It was a big old sea turtle that a fisherman friend sent to us in Cachoeiro.

Men get together to kill a turtle, and it resists for hours. They cut its head off, it continues to flap its flippers. They rip its heart off, the heart continues to beat. Life is deep-rooted in its tissues with an obstinacy that inspires respect and fear. A cut piece of flesh, thrown on the floor, trembles on its own, all of a sudden. Its agony is as terrible and insistent as a nightmare.

Suddenly the men stop and look at each other with the vague feeling that they are committing a crime.

Copacabana dwellers, buy your fish at Francisco Mandarino's Bolivar Fish Market, because within him, in a beautiful moment of his common life, the poet defeated the merchant. Because he did not kill the turtle.

Rio, July, 1959.

Rubem Braga (1913-1990), widely acknowledged in Brazilian literary circles as a master in the art of writing, produced mainly short stories of a literary genre called in Brazil "crônica", defined by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "a short prose sketch integrating elements of essay and fiction" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2008), where the underlying theme, generally taken from real everyday affairs, and the author's reflections about it are in many instances intertwined, making up a unit. However, many of his texts were of a journalistic character, and he would write reports often with a stronger tone, whenever some political or social matter that was a concern of his came into question (Ribeiro 2013). Braga's short stories and reports, numbering in the thousands, were originally published in daily newspapers and weekly magazines, each time on a different subject – he compared a writer as himself to "the gypsy who every night sets up his tent and takes it down in the morning, and goes" (Braga 1955). Only afterwards some of his texts were compiled and published in book format; 18 books were published in his lifetime, the first one in 1936. Dubiela (2010) and Ribeiro (2013) presented analyses of Rubem Braga's literary and journalistic work. A detailed biography was provided by Carvalho (2007).

Braga's subjects ranged from seemingly modest everyday situations to grand scale 20th century world politics. But, among his manifold interests, the natural environment was always to him a most cherished one (Dubiela 2010). He produced short stories about a variety of themes related to nature, and his journalistic reports dealt often extensively with pressing environmental matters of his days, like deforestation, the risk of extinction of some animal species and the drying up of rivers, at a time when legal environmental protection in Brazil and public awareness of environmental problems were well behind the present levels. Many of the themes in his writings on environmental issues came through a working partnership and friendship, over a period of about 27 years, with the Brazilian naturalist Augusto Ruschi (1915-1986), also from Espírito Santo, Braga's native state (Dubiela 2010). A specialist in hummingbirds and orchids but with ample interests in ecology and in the conservation of nature (Marden & Blair 1963), Ruschi was one of the true pioneers in nature conservation in Brazil (see e.g., Ruschi (1949)), combining his work as a biological researcher with intense

political action in conservation (Medeiros 1995). Braga, a most respected writer, with scores of readers all over the country, with a strong concern about the natural world himself, provided, in his own words, "a kind of journalistic support" to Ruschi's campaigns for nature conservation (Braga 1984).

Rubem Braga was ahead of his time in relation to sea turtle conservation in Brazil when he wrote "The Turtle" in 1959. In those days there were no laws protecting these animals, which in Rio de Janeiro, the setting of the story and the then capital of Brazil, were served in restaurants (e.g., Anonymous 1958). Sea turtles were in fact considered a fishing resource, as were all animals living in the sea, so much so that until well into the 1980s the catch of these turtles was included in the official data of the federal government agencies in charge of fisheries statistics in the country (e.g., IBGE 1985). Little was known about sea turtles in Brazil when the short story "The Turtle" was written, but already in 1949 Augusto Ruschi, based on his own field experience, "as a first step" (in his own words) to call the attention of the institutions committed to nature conservation in Brazil at that time, made by his own a list of fauna and flora threatened with extinction in the country, on which he included hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) sea turtles (Ruschi 1949).

The situation concerning both the protection of sea turtles in Brazil and the information about their ecology started to change only around 1980. In that year, Projeto TAMAR, the Brazilian government's sea turtle conservation program, was established (Marcovaldi 1987), marking the beginning of regular sea turtle conservation and research activities in the country. Full legal protection of all species of sea turtles in Brazil, including their eggs, came into force in 1986, after a series of other regulations issued between 1976 and 1984 partially protecting sea turtles by restricting their capture to certain species, size ranges and periods of the year. Currently, sea turtles and their habitats, especially nesting beaches, are protected in Brazil by a range of federal laws and other kinds of legal regulations. Projeto TAMAR developed into a large network of conservation and research stations spread along the Brazilian coast (Marcovaldi & Marcovaldi 1999), and additionally there are all over the country many universities and non-governmental organizations doing research and working for the conservation of sea turtles. As a result of its internal actions, Brazil is now integrated into the worldwide movement for sea turtle conservation, an inherently international endeavor, as these animals recognize no country boundaries. Most significantly, sea turtle populations that nest in Brazil, many of them once heavily exploited and under immediate threat of extinction, are generally thriving (e.g., Silva *et al.* 2007). The National Action Plan for Sea Turtle Conservation, issued in 2011 by the Brazilian government, presents an overview of the current situation regarding the conservation of these turtles in the country (Marcovaldi *et al.* 2011).

Notwithstanding the accomplishments, sea turtle conservation, as everyone who works in this realm in Brazil possibly well knows, is an endless task. Much ingenuity and resources are constantly required, under ever-changing social and political conditions, to maintain and expand what has already been achieved and to meet new and pressing conservation challenges that continually arise. Educational activities and media communications must be continuously addressed, not least because each year a new cohort of schoolchildren needs to be exposed to sea turtle conservation

concepts and to marine conservation in general. In Brazil, a country with a large society comprised of people with a variety of cultural backgrounds and marked educational inequalities, in the long run the most valuable asset of sea turtle conservation, as a basis for society's continued commitment to their preservation, should possibly be the attainment of a high level of public awareness of the value of protecting these beautiful animals and their habitats. The short story "The Turtle" was Rubem Braga's early and touching contribution to the formation of that collective consciousness.

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BOOK REVIEW

Title: Turtles: The Animal Answer Guide

Year: 2009

Authors: Whit Gibbons & Judy Greene

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<https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/turtles>

Turtles are fascinating creatures. With over 300 species worldwide, they are found in a wide variety of habitats, and they range in size from just a few inches long to well over six feet. If you have questions about these wonderful creatures, chances are good that you'll find helpful and informative answers in the book, *Turtles: The Animal Answer Guide*. Authors Whit Gibbons and Judy Greene have put together an amazing resource detailing hundreds of facts about the world's turtles.

Arranged into twelve chapters, the authors answer 108 questions about turtles. To support these answers, the book is nicely illustrated with 36 color and 64 black and white photos. There are also two appendices including common and scientific names of turtle species, and turtle conservation groups, as well as an extensive bibliography and useful index. The binder material used for the front and back covers has a nice soft feel and the overall size of the book is comfortable in the hands. The individual pages are a bit on the thin side, but understandable considering how much material is packed into the 184 pages of the book. Chapter titles such as "Turtle Behavior" and "Reproduction and Development" take us through questions about the many points of turtle natural history, while answers to questions from the more whimsical "Turtles in Stories and Literature" and "Human Problems (from a turtle's viewpoint)" remind us how important turtles are in our lives and culture.

Gibbons and Greene are both accomplished researchers in the field of herpetology, and have both been studying and learning about turtles for over 30 years. From the very first page of the book, they make it clear that turtles are worth knowing about, by including a quote from Alfred Sherwood Romer:

"Because they are still living, turtles are common place objects to us; were they entirely extinct, their shells - the most remarkable defensive armor ever assumed by a tetrapod - would be a cause for wonder."

Continuing in this thread throughout the book, the authors answer questions in a manner that cannot help but steer the reader to an appreciation for turtles, and to consider conservation implications of their actions. Why should people care about turtles? "We should care about turtles because they are a unique and admirable component of native wildlife." What can an ordinary citizen do to help turtles? "The problem would be solved if everyone had the attitude that all turtles were special and that humans have a responsibility to protect them at all costs... People with a strong interest in preserving and protecting turtles must continue to shift public attitudes toward one of responsible stewardship so that improper actions against turtles and other wildlife are viewed with public scorn, regardless of whether a law enforcement official is present."

In addition to the many facts and interesting anecdotes about various turtle species, humor can also be found in the details of many answers. How many kinds of turtles are there? "Taxonomists will continue to enjoy the dynamic process of working out the details while the turtles already know who they are and really do not care one way or the other what we call them." Do turtles have teeth? "Most turtles have relatively sharp-edged upper and lower jaws suitable for slicing plant material, animal prey, or occasionally the finger of a careless biologist."

Turtles: The Animal Answer Guide has something in it for everyone, whether new to the world of turtles, or very familiar with their biology (or, as the authors write, "turtleology").

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