

REVIEW

MAN AND THE TURTLE

HANDBOOK OF TURTLES. By ACHIE CARR. Comstock Publishing Associates, Ithaca, New York: London, Constable and Company. 60s.

The order Chelonia is probably the only large group of reptiles of any considerable economic importance. This book therefore is more than just a systematic account of the turtles of the United States, Canada, and Baja California, but is of interest to the conservationist as well as to the general herpetologist.

This book is the latest in the Handbooks of American Natural History series and follows the same plan as its predecessors. There are introductory chapters on turtle evolution, form, and function and a summary of turtle economics in a chapter entitled "Turtles and Men". The author commences this section by stating that the "practical importance of turtles to man lies mostly in their contribution, actual and potential, to his diet. There can be little doubt that people have been eating turtles as long as they have had the wits to get them out of their shells; and they probably had been eating the eggs long before that."

This gastronomic importance may not be apparent on this side of the Atlantic; we therefore read with no small degree of disgust that no fewer than ten million giant tortoises were removed from the Galapagos Islands in the 1880s by whaling ships in need of fresh meat. Little wonder that these reptiles have been reduced to a remnant of what they once were.

Of more topical interest is the part played in the diet of many people by the marine turtles. We read that while the green turtle is not abundant now "its numbers were once incomparably greater and that the depletion was a result of short-sighted exploitation by man." In the States more and more people are eating turtle steaks and "this bodes ill for the turtle". We can only hope that the author's suggestion is realized before it is too late when he says "in this animal important economic potentialities await only an intelligent plan of management".

The diamondback terrapin is probably the most widely eaten species in the U.S.A and some of the subspecies were once brought to the verge of extinction. However, the imposition of a close season and possibly the decline in popularity has afforded a respite.

Other parts of the book make less pleasant reading, for men do other things with turtles besides eat them. We read that

millions of hatchlings are sold annually as pets and wonder how many survive long in that state. Of greater importance is the hawksbill turtle which provides the tortoiseshell of commerce. Somewhat nauseating to the general reader are the accounts of the ways in which the shell is removed from the living turtle, after which the turtle is returned to the water to grow a new shell. This misguided idea of conservation has apparently been practised since pre-Colombian times. These accounts do not make good reading but so long as tortoiseshell is of commercial importance the hawksbill will suffer.

Throughout the systematic section of the book the author has included chapters on the economic importance of each species discussed. It is not a book intended primarily for the conservationist but the conservationist will find much of value in its chapters.

J. I. M.