

Tourists riding turtles*

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ABSTRACT

Both scientists and holidaymakers once enjoyed riding on the backs of turtles while at the Great Barrier Reef. In spite of the widespread popularity of turtle riding, the practice disappeared into obscurity in the second part of the twentieth century. This paper unveils the historical, social and geographical factors that gave rise to a practice that was peculiar to the holidaymakers of this time and place.

Key words: Turtles, Turtle-riding, Great Barrier Reef, Tourism, History, de Rougemont

Introduction

Who shall forget the hilarity before sun-up as everyone had their turn riding the turtles in the cool and lovely sea?

(“Whampoa” 1930b: 35)

The practice of turtle-riding was once widely enjoyed by holidaymakers and scientists who visited the islands of the Great Barrier Reef. The activity was very popular at the beginning of the twentieth century and then declined quite rapidly into obscurity. Black and white photographs of turtle-riding however, provide a striking reminder of this activity, and are occasionally reproduced simply for their evocative qualities.¹ However, without a historical or geographical context, these images offer little understanding of the significance of turtle-riding. There have been few historical studies of the Reef, and even fewer that describe turtle-riding. Bowen and Bowen include the following summary of the activity in their book *The Great Barrier Reef: History, Science, Heritage*:

One of the advertised diversions [of early Reef island holidays] was turtle-riding in which a noose on the end of a long rope was placed around the neck of a turtle returning to the sea just after she had laid her clutch, with the rider standing on the carapace and attempting to stay on as long as possible while the reptile struggled to escape and swim away, dislodging the rider like a bucking horse. The cruelty of that activity was apparently not appreciated at the time and it was never explained how the noose was removed from the neck of the unfortunate animal.

(Bowen and Bowen 2002)

There are a number of problems with this description which can partly be explained by the ephemeral sources of information about turtle-riding in the historical record. This paper makes a more detailed examination of this evidence to understand the context and origin of the practice. It further examines the way turtle-riding took hold and changed in the context of tourism at the Great Barrier Reef.

Turtle-Riding Origins

The adventures of Louis de Rougemont

Turtle-riding entered European consciousness in the late 1800s, some years before tourism became established on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef. Turtle-riding achieved a level of infamy when a Swiss born Australian adventurer, Louis de Rougemont, published a series of exaggerated tales and improbable adventures in the *British Wide World Magazine*.² His narrative told of his shipwreck and survival in an unspecified part of the Australian continent where he claimed to have lived with Aboriginal people for some thirty years. Among his many amazing tales, is a description of how he rode turtles to amuse himself and escape the despair and boredom he suffered in the days after his shipwreck:

I used to wade out to where the turtles were, and on catching a big six-hundred-pounder, I would calmly sit astride on his back.

Away would swim the startled creature, mostly a foot or so below the surface. When he dived deeper I simply sat far back on the shell, and then he was

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¹ Even today these images are used to evocatively illustrate another era. For instance the *National Geographic Magazine's* Flashback Archive is comprised of selected images that are “full of surprises” and which are “light, related to the stories in the magazine, and, if possible, funny”, the entries for 2000 includes an image of a woman turtle-riding taken from a 1930 issue (*National Geographic Magazine* 2000).

² These were later compiled and published as a book (de Rougemont 1899).

forced to come up. I steered my queer steeds in a curious way. When I wanted my turtle to turn to the left, I simply thrust my foot into his right eye, and vice versa for the contrary direction. My two big toes placed simultaneously over both his optics caused a halt so abrupt as almost to unseat me. Sometimes I would go fully a mile out to sea on one of these strange steeds. It always frightened them to have me astride, and in their terror they swam at a tremendous pace until compelled to desist through sheer exhaustion.

(de Rougemont 1899: 63)

De Rougemont's stories were very popular with the British public, and initially accepted with little scepticism. He was even invited to present lectures to scientific bodies including the Anthropological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Howard 2006: 57-64). However, a rival newspaper, *The Daily Chronicle*, commissioned Louis Becke to compose a weekly critique of the de Rougemont claims. Becke was a recent Australian emigrant who was renowned for his adventures and experiences in the South Seas including his own tale of shipwreck and survival (Howard 2006: 74-5). Becke's criticism, initially published under the pseudonym 'an Australian', questioned the credibility of de Rougemont on a number of grounds. He raised questions about de Rougemont's descriptions of the colonies and Aboriginal people. He also questioned other aspects of de Rougemont's adventures, suggesting that he had greatly exaggerated the size of a giant octopus and that riding a turtle in the sea was implausible:

Now I have caught and handled some thousands of turtle, both afloat and ashore, and I have never yet saw one which when afloat and touched anywhere on its body, did not sink almost vertically.

The Daily Chronicle
Friday, 9 September 1898
(cited in Howard 2006: 67)

De Rougemont's claims came under sustained attack from *The Daily Chronicle* and Becke. Significantly, however, it was turtle-riding that became central to the credibility of his entire tale. It has been suggested that when his adventures were first published '[t]he only thing the London public did not believe was de Rougemont's story of riding turtles' (Clune 1945: 15) and that:

[H]e ruffled their hackles when he described how he jockeyed a turtle around Cape Londonderry. They believed all his other tales, but a turtle gondolier, nothing doing! So the South Sea bubble burst.

(Clune 1945: 16)

While it was not turtle-riding alone that ultimately exposed de Rougemont as a fraud, it was certainly the issue that most vexed him during his life time. In one of his first public speeches he defended his claims to turtle-riding:

[I]t was one of my greatest pastimes, whilst on the little reef-protected sandspit in the Sea of Timor. I must say that when in deep water, the turtle had the advantage of me, and he often left me

altogether. In most cases he would go under when I mounted him, but often I could compel him to rise again by simply leaning well back, so that his very mechanical action in swimming brought him to the surface.

Louis de Rougemont
The Daily Chronicle, Tuesday 13 September 1898
(cited in Howard 2006: 88)

De Rougemont was supported by Admiral Moresby who was a regulator of the pearl-shell fisheries in Torres Strait from 1871-1873 (Howard 2006: 88). Moresby claimed to have considerable experience in turtle taming and agreed that it was possible to climb on a sleeping turtle's back, and that by sitting far back on the shell it was possible to keep the turtle near the surface (Howard 2006: 94-5).

In spite of a high level of public support, de Rougemont was eventually exposed when his true identity was discovered. Publications about his life are tellingly titled the '*The Greatest Liar on Earth*' (Clune 1945) and '*The Fabulist*' (Howard 2006). Even after his exposure, however, the sales of his stories continued to be profitable and were reproduced as a book (Maslen 1977: 174; Howard 2006: 251). De Rougemont also travelled back to Australia with his story which he presented as a lecture illustrated with lantern slides of the *Wide World Magazine* drawings.

In spite of the weight of evidence against him, turtle-riding remained the most critical aspect of both accusation and defence in the de Rougemont case. De Rougemont was determined to demonstrate the plausibility of this claim as a means to defend his entire story and character. When Becke was identified as the author of the criticism in *The Daily Chronicle* in 1898, de Rougemont publicly challenged him to a turtle ride. When Becke failed to accept the challenge it became grounds for de Rougemont to make an attack on Becke's own authority (Howard 2006: 124-5, 145). But turtle-riding continued to plague de Rougemont. During his lecture tour in Australia in 1901, the Sydney audience overtly laughed at the slide that depicted de Rougemont riding a turtle. In response de Rougemont stated that:

This is a thing I've been kicked about more than anything else, you can believe that. I'll prove it, for I intend to get a turtle and do the same with it in Port Jackson.

Louis de Rougemont
(cited in Maslen 1977: 176; Howard 2006: 259)

On this occasion, a turtle-riding demonstration did not eventuate, but in July 1906 de Rougemont appeared in the London Hippodrome to finally prove that it was possible to ride a turtle in water (The Times 1906). He introduced his performance by saying:

I said that when I was living on an island I amused myself by riding turtles in water. They jeered and said it could not be done. I am old, my strength is not what it was, my limb have lost the suppleness of youth, but still I am prepared to show you that I can do it.

Louis de Rougemont
(cited in Howard 2006: 262)

Before the London audience, de Rougemont mounted and rode a turtle across a rubber pool. He demonstrated that he could handle the turtle and repeat the exercise. This showed the public that although ungainly, the act of turtle-riding was possible, and hinted that perhaps de Rougemont had told the truth (Clune 1945: 19-20; Maslen 1977: 177-78; Howard 2006: 262-64) (Figure 1). Buoyed by his modest success, de Rougemont made a bolder claim a month later when he declared that he would ride a turtle from Dover to Calais. The start of this feat was attended by a record crowd, but a rough sea and an already exhausted turtle quickly brought this grand plan to an end. This was de Rougemont's last public attempt to ride a turtle, after which he largely disappeared from the public eye (Maslen 1977: 178-80; Howard 2006: 264-5).



Figure 1. Louis de Rougemont demonstrates his turtle-riding skills in London 1906 ©Australian Picture Library

Indigenous hunting practices

Although Louis de Rougemont was largely discredited in his lifetime, there is some consensus that his narrative was built from observations and adventures of his own and of others. A central component of his narrative, and that which gained him invitations from the scientific community in England, related the life and customs of Aboriginal people. Like other parts of his story, this appears to be a composite of material from his travels in Australia. De Rougemont blended his story from his own experience and the published and unpublished accounts of many others, including the little known Harry Stockdale who had considerable knowledge of Aboriginal people of the northwest (Clune 1945: 6-7; Howard 2006: 219-31, 240-42). While de Rougemont's accounts of Aboriginal life and customs are of questionable accuracy, some of his claims were based on direct observations of Aboriginal people. It is possible that these included activities that may have evolved into turtle-riding.

It is unclear whether turtle-riding was practised by Indigenous people as a form of recreational activity, but there are suggestions that turtle hunting practices shared some similarities with de Rougemont's descriptions. As early as the mid 1800s, Charles Darwin recorded the indigenous people of Keeling Island riding on the backs of turtles as a means of capture:

April 6th. -- I accompanied Captain Fitz Roy to an island at the head of the lagoon: the channel was exceedingly intricate, winding through fields of delicately branched corals. We saw several turtle and two boats were then employed in catching them. The water was so clear and shallow, that although at first a turtle quickly dives out of sight, yet in a canoe or boat under sail, the pursuers after no very long chase come up to it. A man standing ready in the bow, at this moment dashes through the water upon the turtle's back; then clinging with both hands by the shell of its neck, he is carried away till the animal becomes exhausted and is secured. It was quite an interesting chase to see the two boats thus doubling about, and the men dashing head foremost into the water trying to seize their prey.

(Darwin 1845: Chapter 20)

Howard (2006: 90) has hinted that de Rougemont may have been aware of Darwin's observations from the Cocos Islands.³ It is also possible that he learned of similar practices in Australia. Three months after de Rougemont's death in 1921 *Australia's Nor'West*, a film which chronicled the 1917 Stuart Expedition was released. This included footage that seemed to vindicate de Rougemont on a number of counts, including a segment in which Indigenous people rode turtles on land and in the water (The Times 1923; Howard 2006: 268-69).

The suggestion that Aboriginal people rode turtles adds another dimension to the de Rougemont claim and hints at a possibility that turtle-riding may have grown from Indigenous hunting practices. Much of our knowledge of Aboriginal culture and people at the time of European colonisation is based on the observations of the early explorers and navigators who recorded observations in their journals and diaries. Their observations extended to Aboriginal peoples and included accounts of their cultural material and practices. While there is no direct evidence that Louis de Rougemont drew his inspiration for turtle-riding from these observations, it is significant that the earliest descriptions of the Great Barrier Reef recorded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander turtle hunting practices.

Turtle hunting practices are diverse along the length of the northern Australian coastline and within the Great Barrier Reef region. The remarkable and novel method of using suckerfish to hunt turtle in the Torres Strait drew the attention of the earliest European navigators:

³ In 1930 self imposed castaway Robert Dan Friskbie suggested that the local people in the Cook Islands used a method of turtle fishing was very similar to that described by de Rougemont (Howard 2006: 275).

A live sucking-fish (*Echeneis remora*) having previously been secured by a line passed round the tail, is thrown into the water in certain places known to be suitable for the purpose; the fish while swimming about makes fast by its sucker to any turtle of this small kind which it may chance to encounter, and both are hauled in together!

(MacGillivray and Carron 1852)⁴

And later amateur and professional scientists, drawn to the Great Barrier Reef by their naturalist interests, observed these and other hunting practices. There are several descriptions of Aboriginal people harpooning turtles from boats. The technique of launching the harpoon from the prow of a dinghy; the hunter poised and then flung forward, diving into the water also produced some dramatic images. These include a series of enlarged black and white photographs captured by scientist Crosbie Morrison in the Torres Strait in the 1920s (Morrison 1924). And a decade later, non-Indigenous hunters are captured in similar poses in the promotional photographs from *Walkabout Magazine* (Roderick 1936). Indigenous and recreational turtle hunting is also depicted in the late 1940s (see, for example, Stuckey 1945; Brindle 1949b, 1949a, 1949c, 1949d).

In other parts of the Great Barrier Reef turtles were hunted at sea by other means. A description by Henry Lamond suggests that, in the Whitsundays region, Aboriginal hunters used ropes and then stunned the turtles with a club ("U.S.L." 1948). In both the northern and southern regions of the Great Barrier Reef there is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also captured turtles by overturning the females that came ashore to lay their eggs. This was a method adopted and intensively used by the non-Indigenous turtle hunters who worked at the soup canneries in the Capricorn Group of Islands in the 1920s (Gilbert 1926; Napier 1928: 134-38; Patterson 1946; Pocock 2006). The canneries also employed a number of other Indigenous hunting techniques:

The turtle-hunters do not confine their operations solely to catching females returning to the sea after egg-laying. They also pursue the turtles in the open sea, visiting their various feeding grounds in motor boats. The amphibians are then caught by diving – a much more thrilling and exciting method than turning them over on the sand.

Either natives or white men do the diving; they take a long rope with them, and, gripping a turtle's carapace, they loop the rope round the plunging creature's neck and front flippers. The helpless amphibian is then hauled to the surface. Although this may sound easy work, it is both hard and dangerous. The turtles are very speedy swimmers and have great strength, so that it is by no means child's play to get astride a turtle's back under water and slip a rope around its neck and flippers.

(Patterson 1946: 27)

While there is variation in the methods used to hunt turtles, a number of techniques require the hunter to dive after the turtle into the water. A small turtle can be drawn back to a boat if it has been harpooned or attached to a rope by sucker fish. But large turtles are much more powerful and the hunt is often completed in water. This leads to a struggle between human hunter and hunted turtle, and the competition is challenging. There are elements of this struggle that are encapsulated in later accounts of turtle-riding.

It can be imagined that these methods of hunting may have inspired de Rougemont and others to attempt turtle-riding. There is additional evidence that suggests Aboriginal people may also have engaged in a kind of turtle-riding on land. There are images of Aboriginal people, usually men, sitting on the backs of sea turtles on the beach. These are provenanced to both the Northern Territory and Queensland. One image shows an Aboriginal man kneeling on the back of a turtle on the sea edge (Myers ca. 1900-ca. 1914) (Figure 2). The man's torso marked with cicatrices is upright, back straight and arms raised above his head. The pose suggests that he is balancing on a moving turtle. Later images of Aboriginal people sitting on turtles include an Aboriginal man from Lindeman Island, sitting astride a turtle in the shallows, his legs forward behind the turtle's front flippers (National Archives of Australia 1946).⁵

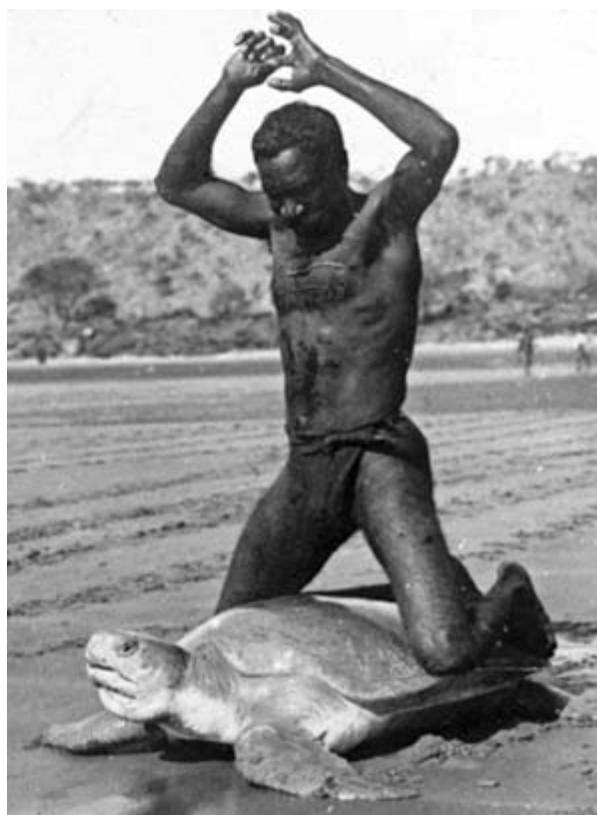


Figure 2. Aboriginal man riding a turtle ca. 1900-1914. Photo by Harold Myers courtesy of the La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

⁴ Also reported by (Yonge 1928; Yonge 1929-1985)

⁵ There are similar images from the Northern Territory including an Aboriginal man holding a turtle's carapace with his hands on the dry sand (National Archives of Australia 1937), and images of turtle-riding from Torres Strait (Schomberg ca. 1925 - 1935).

It is likely that the composition of these images was orchestrated by non-Indigenous photographers. However, it is unclear to what extent these turtle-riding poses were inspired by Aboriginal practices. The images date to the same period in which tourism developed at the Reef and during which turtle-riding experienced its heyday on the islands (discussed below). However, the images of young holidaymakers on turtles were used to illustrate Reef holidays. While Aboriginal people were employed in the early tourism industry, they were not generally included in the promotion of the region. It is more likely that these images depict another idea altogether; that is of Aboriginality. It is quite possible that these compositions were illustrative of a practice already recognised within some Aboriginal societies. This suggests that sitting on turtles or something that might be interpreted as turtle-riding may have existed independently of the activities of early holidaymakers.

Whether directly or indirectly through the accounts of de Rougemont it is quite plausible that turtle-riding was informed or even inspired by observations of indigenous people riding turtles in Australia and other parts of the Pacific.

Turtle-Riding Tourists

Whatever its origins, turtle-riding achieved a level of notoriety through the exploits of de Rougemont. But those who observed his demonstrations at the London Hippodrome suggested that the turtle was not a creature suited to carrying humans (Howard 2006: 263-64). It is perhaps surprising then, that some twenty to thirty years later turtle-riding became an established and popular activity for holidaymakers at the Great Barrier Reef.

Evidence of turtle-riding comes from rather ephemeral sources related to tourism at the Great Barrier Reef. These include written texts in magazine and newspaper articles, guidebooks and unpublished diaries and letters. The most common evidence of turtle-riding, however, comes from photographic images. Significantly, turtle-riding is often represented by photographs with no accompanying text. The numerous written descriptions of holidays at the Great Barrier Reef were frequently illustrated with photographs of turtle-riding even when the activity was not mentioned in the related passage. The images are immediately illustrative of the practice with no interpretation beyond a short caption. For instance the December 1936 issue of *Walkabout Magazine* features a picture of a woman riding a turtle in the shallow waters. The list of contents credits the cover design as 'Turtle-Riding at Heron Island, Great Barrier Reef'. This is followed by a short article about Heron Island which mentions the thrill of participating in a turtle hunt and describes activities at the turtle factory (Roderick 1936), but does not even mention turtle-riding so prominently advertised on the front cover of the magazine. (See also photographs accompanying Barrett 1930: 362; "Whampoa" 1930a: 22; *The Sun* 1932; *The Sunday Sun and Guardian* 1932; *The World* 1932b, 1932a; Wigmore 1932b). Another source of evidence for turtle-riding comes from promotional film segments, newsreels and home movies. There are fewer of these

records, which may reflect the relatively high costs of motion film early in the twentieth century. Nevertheless footage of turtle-riding that does exist dates from the 1920s to the 1940s (O'Sullivan 1929; Monkman 1933; Allan 1947). When considered together these sources can be used to construct a picture of turtle-riding at the Great Barrier Reef.

Images of turtles are common among the earliest of photographs, partly because turtles were one of the few animals that came ashore and could be photographed easily. The limitations of photographic technology in the early decades of the twentieth century made it difficult to capture images of living marine creatures (Pocock 2004). While turtles are a marine creature, they can live out of water for short periods, and leaving the sea is part of their natural life-cycle and habits. This made it possible to photograph these creatures on land and in the company of humans (Pocock 2006). This level of access meant that people could pose with, and on, turtles that came ashore.

There are several images, especially from the first decade of twentieth century that show individuals, some fully dressed, sitting on the backs of turtles that are on the sand. In many of these images, the person sits sideways across the back of the turtle which suggests that neither the turtle nor the human are moving (Figure 3). A collection of photographs from a trip to the Great Barrier Reef by a group of South Australian ornithologists in ca. 1908 contains a number of images of such passive poses



Figure 3. Woman sitting on a turtle at the Great Barrier Reef ca. 1908. Photo courtesy of the State Library of South Australia (SLSA B 57823/206)

(Anonymous ca. 1908). The collection also includes images of people standing upright on turtles' backs on the sand. Images of people sitting on the backs of turtles and tortoises are reasonably common throughout the world, and can simply be read as an opportunity to touch and sit on a wild animal that has little capacity to object, escape or retaliate. However, among the earliest photographs of people at the Reef appear other kinds of images of people more actively riding turtles.

The 1908 collection of photographs includes several additional images that suggest that the ornithologists not only posed with turtles but actively tried to ride them (Anonymous ca. 1908). Men and women clad in long swimming trunks are depicted kneeling on the backs of turtles, holding onto the front of the carapace in shallow water or close to the water's edge (Figure 4). These suggest that at least some of the group were adventurous enough to try turtle-riding. There are few written descriptions of turtle-riding from this time, and even when it is mentioned in texts from the 1920s it is assumed to be a self-explanatory activity:

We did a little riding on the turtles; but the call of other attractions on and about the island was too strong to allow us to devote very much precious time to frivolities of that kind. A previous zoological party that visited the Capricorns fifteen years ago had more opportunities for this form of "buck-jumping" than we did. This reminds me that Mr. Harry Burrell, of Sydney, who was one of the 1910 party, told me a few days ago that he gently tied a blue ribbon around the neck of a turtle which he rode fifteen years ago, and he asked – with a twinkle in his eye – if I saw anything of that blue ribbon lady. I assured him that I didn't.

(Gilbert 1925)

The visitors bathed twice daily in the warm and clear water of the lagoon, while turtle riding was frequently indulged in, and caused much merriment.

(*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1925)



Figure 4. Ornithologists from South Australia try turtle-riding at the Great Barrier Reef ca. 1908. Photo courtesy of the State Library of South Australia (SLSA B 57823/198)

They tell you of catching round white eggs like golf balls as they come from the turtle, at the rate of up to 200 a sitting, while Mrs. Turtle cocks a mournful eye at them over her shoulder. They even ask you to believe that they bounced the eggs on her back, and then took them home to make batter for turtle-steak, and rode another turtle down to their morning bathe.

(*Bank Notes* 1932: 18)

The more detailed written descriptions of turtle-riding come from the late 1920s and 1930s.

It is a comparatively easy matter to ride a turtle on the sand — unless, indeed, you emulate one of our ladies and attempt to do it sitting "side-saddle," when the result of a sudden shuffled turn on the part of the steed is apt to prove more appealing to the spectators than to the rider. But to ride a turtle after she has entered the sea, and has got a good gait on, takes some doing. Only one or two of our party managed to master the art at all; but they did well enough to prove that de Rougemont was not so close a relative to Baron Munchausen⁶ as has been commonly supposed. As a matter of fact that unfortunate Frenchman [sic] has been very grievously maligned. At the worst – as when he said he saw a "flock of wombats" flying over the trees – he was probably guilty only of one of those "terminological inexactitudes" to which men – and even scientists – are liable. He probably meant "wongas" or "brolgas" when he said "wombats"; and as for his turtle-riding, every one knows now that he spoke the truth.

(*Napier* 1928: 139-40)

De Rougemont's exploits were remembered, and we tried turtle rides, with less success, but more fun perhaps, than Louis enjoyed, according to his famous story. Our rides were brief and exciting. We crept upon sleeping turtles and made seats on their carapaces. Thus surprised, they scrambled over the sand, plowing quaint furrows with their flippers, and gained the lagoon. Once in fairly deep water, the turtle won the game. A dive unseated the rider, who splashed ashore for another little joyride to the sea.

(*Barrett* 1930: 375)

These accounts of tourists riding turtles on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef make direct and striking references to the de Rougemont story. They continue the theme of de Rougemont's life in that they link turtle-riding with the overall credibility of his story. For these earliest of Reef tourists the de Rougemont story was familiar and popular, and their own attempts at turtle-riding were an attempt to prove his claims. Turtle-riding as a tourist pursuit, however, developed a profile all of its own that seems to be particular to the islands of the Great Barrier Reef.

The activity of turtle-riding highlights the close relationship between humans and turtles at the Great Barrier Reef at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was fostered

⁶ Münchhausen was an eighteenth century German Baron renowned for his fanciful tales, including material derived from others.

by a number of coincidental factors including seasons and geography. The turtle breeding beaches of Heron and North West Islands were the primary hunting grounds for the commercial canneries that manufactured turtle-soup from green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and a small amount of shell from hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) (Whitley 1925; Ogilvie 1977; Neil 1997; Pocock 2006). The canneries also paved the way for interactions between tourists and turtles.

Tourism gathered momentum at the Great Barrier Reef during the 1920s and 1930s as holidaymakers joined scientific expeditions (Barr 1990; Pocock 2003). The turtle factories helped to accommodate groups of visitors at a time when there was little infrastructure on the islands (Pocock 2005). The canneries were quite simple operations, but the structures included water tanks and work sheds which provided much needed drinking water and the comfort of communal cooking and dining facilities. The use of the canneries as the base camps meant that holidaymakers and scientists were situated in close proximity to the turtle nesting beaches.

It was the nesting habits of turtles that greatly facilitated tourists' ability to engage in turtle-riding and gave rise to its popularity at the Great Barrier Reef. Female turtles habitually leave the ocean to lay their eggs during the breeding season which coincided with the most popular visitor season, the annual summer holidays. The turtle breeding season therefore increased the opportunity of human-turtle encounters (Pocock 2006). This included opportunities to ride turtles.

A tour of adventure was then commenced round the beach. In a moment, while hurriedly walking through the heavy sand a large turtle was observed crawling quickly on to a small grassy mound. Immediately a yell of excitement rent the air and we were all running frantically along in a curious frame of mind to get a glimpse of the strange looking animal. Some one then jumped upon the turtle, and another cried out excitedly: "Roll him over"; whereupon a very enthusiastic youth secured a big stick which he used as a lever, and after considerable exertion on the part of a number of the party the turtle was overturned. The animal flung his flipper viciously to and fro, flapping them across the body and gesticulating comically. When given freedom the turtle hurriedly crawled back into the water from which he had come. Altogether we discovered a dozen or more turtles, some of which were seen scooping large holes, evidently for the purpose of laying eggs, these being subsequently covered over with sand, and it is said they hatch out on their own account. I was informed that the larger turtles, which it is asserted are very strong and weigh as much as two hundred-weight, could easily carry a person some distance, and to test the validity of this statement I "Tod Sloane"⁷ a big greenback, as if riding a racehorse, with my knees well up over the forepart

of the shell. My mount careered wildly forward, stopping occasionally to breathe. When near the water I dismounted, and the turtle quickly entered the water and swam away.

(*The Queenslander* 1925)

Although turtles spend time on land, they are much more adapted to life in the ocean and will return to the sea in the face of any threat or discomfort. This tendency made turtle-riding possible because when a human mounts a turtle, the turtle is provoked into returning to the ocean. From the first de Rougemont description, it is the fear or startlement of the turtles that created the sport.

... as turtle-riders to the sea, our party distinguished themselves jointly and severally. A turtle can carry a man with ease, and many were the men – and women – whom the turtles of Lady Musgrave and N.W. Islet were obliged to carry. For, although as I have said, they lay only at night, they could often be found upon the beach during the daytime, either coming to their laying early or leaving it late. It was on such occasions that we used them as festive steeds; and great was the fun we got out of the experience.

(*Napier* 1928: 139-41)

Changing practices

Turtle-riding may have begun as an adventurous and spontaneous activity, but as the tourism industry grew, a number of changes were introduced. The above descriptions suggest that for some at least, riding turtles was an opportunistic encounter facilitated by the large numbers of turtles that came ashore to lay their eggs during the breeding season. The proximity of holidaymakers and turtle-hunters, however, brought about another trend in turtle-riding that was both more premeditative and more exploitative. Turtle-hunters used a method known to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whereby turtles were overturned so that they could not return to the water. This allowed the hunters to keep the catch alive (and the meat fresh) until they were slaughtered for food or for the factories. This same method made it possible for holidaymakers to have turtles available to them at any time (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

The united strength of three men was needed often to overturn a turtle caught napping on the sand. Grasping flippers and tail and the edge of the shield, we gave a sharp heave, and our friend was lying helpless on its back. The Turtle Derby of Masthead Islet was a memorable event! The jockeys wore bathing suites, and the "winning post" was just the sunlit sea.

(*Barrett* 1930: 375)

The amusement provided by turtle-riding resulted in it becoming a fixture of many Reef excursions. The popularity of the activity and growing numbers of tourists, however, meant that turtle-riding eventually became a more planned group activity. This demanded a more certain stock of turtles, and visitors (or the organisers) began to rely on the practice of turning turtles on their backs.

⁷Tod Sloane was a famous American jockey who popularized the short stirrup riding style.



Figure 5. Overturned turtles surrounded by holidaymakers near Bundaberg, Queensland ca. 1930. Photo courtesy of John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.



Figure 6. Turtle-riding on Heron Island, Queensland, 1938. Photo courtesy of John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

In spite of these developments, however, turtle-riding continued to be characterised as a fair competition between human and animal:

Once on her back on the beach, Mrs. Turtle is helpless, and can either be used for soup or steaks, or kept in position for a turtle-riding party in the morning.

Rather than encounter this danger, she will exhaust every effort to get back to the water, and it is as well to keep clear of those angry spurred flippers while you are trying to tip over that lively three hundred weight.⁸

Even scientists cannot refrain from the frivolity of turtle-riding – a sport which requires a considerable degree of skill and pertinacity.

The shiny, convex shell affords scant security, and the motion is rather like the gait of a camel.

the [sic] correct technique is to grasp with the fingers the edge of the shell immediately above the nape of the neck, sit as near the centre of the back as possible, and hold tight.

The turtle does the rest – not always to the satisfaction of the rider.

In the water the progress is swifter, but the feat more hazardous. The head of the turtle must be kept up, and a favorite [sic] joke played upon the beginner is to persuade him or her to give the mount a rest by allowing it to assume a horizontal position, with head submerged.

Immediately this happens, the turtle gets the chance she wants, and makes a swift dive to the cool depths of her native ocean, leaving her rider to scramble out unaided.

(Wigmore 1932a)

The majority of written accounts from this period describe the excitement and thrill of riding from sand to sea. They share a narrative which suggests that the advantage humans have on land is quickly overcome in the sea when the turtle gains the upper hand. The shift of power from human rider to turtle mount is an integral feature of turtle-riding in this period (Pocock 2006). Ultimately it was the human rider who was humiliated and lost the contest. This allowed visitors to conceive of the competition between turtle and humans as equal (Pocock 2006).

In spite of this, however, the quote by Bowen and Bowen points to a practice that requires further consideration. They suggest that 'it was never explained how the noose was removed from the neck of the unfortunate animal' (Bowen and Bowen 2002: 283). Everyone – scientists, journalists, holidaymakers, women and men – participated in turtle-riding and all took pleasure in the turtle's triumph and escape. These early accounts of turtle-riding suggest that the rider only used their hands to hold onto the carapace (Figure 7).



Figure 7. A young woman rides on the back of a turtle at Mon Repos, Queensland ca. 1930. Photo courtesy of John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

⁸ A hundredweight (abbreviated to cwt.) equals 112 pounds (50.8 kilograms).

Certainly it was unnecessary to tether turtles to capture or control them. Turning turtles on their backs provided an effective means of securing the animals indefinitely. And a turtle returning to the sea did not require guidance, and posed no serious threat to the human rider. Nevertheless, there are some photographs which show turtles with ropes around their necks or flippers. A possible explanation is found in the photographic compositions. For instance, the photograph on the cover of *Walkabout Magazine* from 1936 illustrates a young woman in bathing cap and swimming costume kneeling on a turtle. They are pictured in shallow clear water. The rider leans forward to hold a short piece of rope looped around the turtle's neck to bring the turtle's head up out of the water at the forefront of the photograph. Without such techniques submerged turtles made relatively uninteresting photographs. The underwater turtle was often little more than a blurred and dark shadow beneath the water surface even when captured by skilled professional photographers (see, for example, Hurley n.d.). For the same reason it is more common to depict turtles and riders on the sand. Some of these images, however, also depict ropes around the turtle. It is unclear whether the ropes simply signified 'riding' as it is understood in relation to other animals or whether they were used to keep the animal subject still for the photograph (cf. Pocock 2006). The human poses are, however, inconsistent with the descriptions of turtle-riding; either depicting individuals standing casually on the turtle's back or reclining sideways across the shell.

Generally ropes are only present in early photographs where the pose suggests a staged, as opposed to actual, incident of turtle-riding (Pocock 2006). However, in the decades that followed the initial rise of tourism at the Reef it appears that the use of rope was introduced. As tourism expanded in the Great Barrier Reef region, resorts were constructed on the islands (Barr 1990). Tourists were less likely to be accommodated close to turtle beaches⁹, and turtle-riding became much more contrived. A film segment from 1947 shows a woman standing on a turtle's back holding a rope looped around the turtle's flippers (Allan 1947). Her stance is more like that of someone trying to waterski or aquaplane, a water sport that introduced as a tourist activity at the Reef around this time. The rope doesn't appear to guide the turtle, but simply gives the rider a point of balance. In this particular film sequence, the turtle lurches along a sandy track where groups of spectators look on. The turtle appears to be confined to soft dry sand track, where it has been encouraged to make several trips. This is no longer a spontaneous encounter between turtle and human and the competition is no longer structured for the turtle's escape. Both the manner of turtle riding and the use of ropes to support the new stances and facilitate multiple riders made turtle-riding in this instance a very different practice. However, the turtle is also less likely to have returned to the sea on its own, so it is possible that the rope did not become the hindrance implied or assumed by the Bowens. Nevertheless these

developments certainly suggest that in the later decades of its practice, turtle-riding became a more exploitative form of entertainment and recreation.

This is supported by one of the very last descriptions of an attempt to ride a turtle. In a 1955 publication, the science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke travelled to the Great Barrier Reef with photographer Mike Wilson. On one occasion, and in the company of an underwater researcher, they came across some turtles in an offshore coral pool. They caught and overturned one turtle and took turns at being photographed on its back. The turtle escaped after Wilson tried to ride it in the water. The party subsequently decide to transport another turtle back to shore, and the description suggests a great deal more effort and injury to the turtle than is common in earlier descriptions of turtle riding. The turtle was also later placed in a tank (Clarke 1955: 220-24).

In spite of an apparent escalation in exploitative practices in turtle riding, the sport does not seem to have attracted any criticism in the decades during which it was practised. While turtle hunting, especially for the soup canneries, was quickly recognised as detrimental to the turtle population, turtle riding appears to have declined independently of any animal welfare or conservation concerns. There is some evidence in timing to suggest that turtle-riding was replaced by other kinds of activities, especially those like snorkelling and diving that provided greater access to the underwater (Pocock 2006).

Discussion and Conclusion

Turtles played a significant role in early twentieth century visitor experiences of the Great Barrier Reef, as both a source of food and objects of scientific curiosity. I have suggested elsewhere that the fascination with turtles and especially turtle-riding was a manifestation of interest in the underwater world (Pocock 2006). The close relationship constructed through turtle-riding was fostered by the proximity of large numbers of turtles and visitors on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef.

In spite of the demise of turtle riding, the human-turtle interaction has remained a popular tourist attraction at the Reef. Their status as creatures that bridge the sea-land divide makes them particularly significant as creatures that are both like us and unlike us (cf. Mullin 1999; Pocock 2006). This gives tourists a continuing fascination in turtles and some of the earliest Reef activities – watching turtles come ashore to lay their eggs, and to witness the emergence of hatchlings – continue to be a highlight of contemporary tourist experiences at the Great Barrier Reef (Wilson and Tisdell 2001; Environment Australia and Ierino 2003). It is for this reason too, that images of people riding turtles have an instant appeal and that images of turtle riding have been reproduced in the past and present without any explanation of the activity even when it was no longer practised.

⁹ For instance, Mont Embury one of the foremost tourism entrepreneurs failed to obtain a permanent lease in the Capricorn Islands and consequently moved his operations to a base camp on Hayman Island, a continental island in the Whitsundays (Barr 1990; Bowen and Bowen 2002: 285).

In spite of this, however, the images of turtle riding are not always representative of how the activity was practised. Nor do these images necessarily explain why turtle riding was so popular at the Great Barrier Reef. This paper has demonstrated that turtle-riding achieved a high level of participation because of a particular (and perhaps extraordinary) confluence of events. These include the publications of Louis de Rougemont and the debate that raged during and after his life. This ensured a high level of awareness among the general Australian population of the heavy weight placed on proving de Rougemont's claim to turtle-riding. And through a number of coincidences of timing and geography, early Reef holidaymakers found themselves on turtle nesting beaches during the breeding season. This provided many opportunities to test de Rougemont's claims for themselves, and to develop a practice that was very particular to these times. The practice was also directly and indirectly shaped by the various methods of Indigenous and commercial turtle hunting in the region.

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It is easy to assume in an era much more conscious of animal rights and conservation concern that that turtle-riding declined because people became more sensitive to the needs of these animals. However, even the earliest description by Louis de Rougemont suggests that fear motivated the animal to move. And developments in turtle riding suggest that the practice became more exploitative over time, rather than less so. It is therefore more likely that an explanation for the decline of turtle-riding can be equally ascribed to the decline in popularity and even knowledge of de Rougemont, a shift in both the type and location of tourist accommodation, and the end of turtle-hunting practices.

Turtle-riding is therefore a complex outcome of the confluence of time and space that gave rise to tourism at the Reef. The continued circulation of evocative images of turtle riding most commonly alerts people to the practice which has otherwise become obscured by other histories and tourism activities. This allows descriptions of the activity to become simplistic and inaccurate.

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