

TURTLE POETRY

Editorial Introduction. — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material. We encourage our readers to submit poetry or songs for consideration, either their own material or work by other authors. Poems may be submitted to Wallace J. Nichols, 2103 Vallejo, San Francisco, CA 94123 or Anders G.J. Rhodin, Chelonian Research Foundation, 168 Goodrich Street, Lunenburg, MA 01462.

Our desire is to share with our readers the beauty and wonder of turtles as expressed through the art of the poem or song. In the sense that the relationship between man and turtles is multifaceted, so too is turtle poetry. The poems we publish here will reflect that complexity, from poems of pure admiration for the creatures themselves to others reflecting the utilization of turtles and their products. Some poems will reflect man's use of the turtle for sustenance, others will stress man's need to preserve and protect turtles. Some will deal with our emotional interactions with turtles, others will treat turtles light-heartedly or with seeming disrespect, but all will hopefully help us to better understand both the human and the chelonian condition, and remind us that the turtle holds a sacred place in all our hearts.

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Playa Grande Beach

MICHAEL H.J. RHODIN¹

As though the weight of a thousand generations
had been laid across its back,
the black form rose between the waves,
pulling itself onto midnight sand.

In the absence of light
the Costa Rican heavens fell upon the shore,
illuminating the leatherback sea turtle
in her quest up the beach.

The ancient creature turned, eyes to her home,
and with laborious, alternating strokes,
dug her back flippers into the ground, cupping the sand,
and hurling it in a shower to either side.

Then, 3 feet later, the digging stopped and I
crawled forward, sand clinging to my palms and knees,
a wet, spherical egg dropped
into the womb of the earth.

I watched as every chance at life
was given up to the earth by the mother;
88 chances for their race to survive.
88 prayers in the face of extinction.

Nest completed,
I touched her soft shell
as she crawled back to the ocean
her path ingrained in my mind.

Editorial Comment. — This poem was written by my son at age 20, nearly two years after seeing leatherback turtles nesting on the beach at Playa Grande in Costa Rica. This had been his first experience with sea turtles and it left him with an indelible and powerful emotional image. His experience was similar to my own first encounter with nesting leatherbacks on a beach in Mexico in the early 1980s. These types of encounters leave most of us with a heightened sense of personal caring and responsibility for the endangered turtles of the world and help make us better conservationists, whether we work directly in the world of turtle conservation or not. The more people that we can encourage to experience these types of turtle encounters the better — it is the unconverted masses that need to be brought to this natural altar and allowed to experience and hopefully understand the sacredness of the moment, and the emotional need to preserve it for future generations. Then perhaps we will slowly win the battle to help preserve the turtles of the world.

¹ Composed November 1999