

Painting of Merlin,
the sea turtle, by Ila
France Porcher

Text, photos and illustrations
by Ila France Porcher

Sighting a sea turtle on a dive is always a pleasure. However, few know much about what they are like as animals. Being reptiles, it is assumed that they are essentially on automatic—emotionless and thoughtless. But we changed our minds about that when Merlin came. Ila France Porcher relays the tale of rehabilitating a young sea turtle when she lived in a remote area of Tahiti, at a time when turtles were often hunted for food.

Merlin came at sunrise, carried on the waves, a green sea turtle afloat and flailing. I carried him in from the sea and installed him in a deep blue basin where he steadily strove to dive down. But he could not. He floated high in the water so that all but the edge of his shell was above the surface and his respiratory rate was very fast—he took about one breath per minute. He was a rich amber colour with intricately patterned wings, head, and hind fins. His shell was nearly round and thirty-

nine centimetres in length. Suspecting that his buoyancy was the result of a respiratory infection, I began injections of antibiotics immediately.

He was calmer the next morning but still spent much of his time try-

ing to submerge. Whenever I put my hand near him, he moved his head to press against it.

Merlin's condition declined until he lay immobile on the surface. He did not swallow the small fish and vegeta-

bles I put into his mouth; I had to push them down his throat. His flesh lost its vitality, and his respiratory rate slowed to a breath every fifteen or twenty minutes. When taken daily to swim, there was no muscle response. His

head and fins hung motionless, and his mouth was slack. When his course of antibiotics was finished, mucous seeped from him and strands of it filled the water. I changed it often.

Weeks turned to months as he wait-

Merlin's Sentience

— *The Story of a Sea Turtle*

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Sea Turtle

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The story of Merlin takes place in the French Polynesian island of Moorea (above); The drop-off on the reef wall (left), where Merlin (right) was afraid to go



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ed at death's door, and my husband, Franck, and I gave up hope that he would live. It seemed unbelievable that he could go on so long in such a lifeless state.

Return to life

But there came a day when

he began to move weakly. As he slowly returned to the world of the living, he began to hold his head up enough that his eyes were above the water's surface so he could watch us moving around the house.

We encouraged him to swim in the sea, hoping that exercise

would help to clear his lungs, and put him in an inflatable pool on the deck. He circled it slowly, looking around. I held a shellfish under the surface and he waved one wing back and forth until he drifted near. Then he lunged upon it. But though he had it between his jaws, he was unable to manipulate it into his mouth. Even when I steadied him, he could not eat, in spite of multiple manoeuvres and thrashing about. He became so frustrated with his difficulties that I put it into his mouth as I had done when he was very sick. After that, he always relaxed his jaw so I could put his food in his mouth, and never did he bite.

Nourishment

Now that he was recovering, he required a surprising

amount of food, and keeping him supplied with shellfish was impossible. I began giving him tiny fish donated by a fisherman and took him daily looking for seaweeds that he might like. Once, as we drifted along, I opened his mouth to check that he had no rotting food inside. Looking right at me, he opened his mouth so that I could see in all the way to his stomach, and powerfully expelled a cloud of rotting fish into my face. I took it as a statement and never gave him those fish again.

Instead, I collected snails and other items from the rocks along the shore for him, and took frequent excursions to the reef to bring back quantities of a seaweed beloved by sea turtles. Occasionally, there were turtles grazing there and

some were very large, more than a metre in length. Their shells were elongated compared with Merlin's, which was nearly as round as a pie; clearly, he was a juvenile. His pool was decorated with

a variety of sea plants in an effort to discover more foods that he liked. He was still unable to dive, but floated lower in the water with his shell now half-submerged.

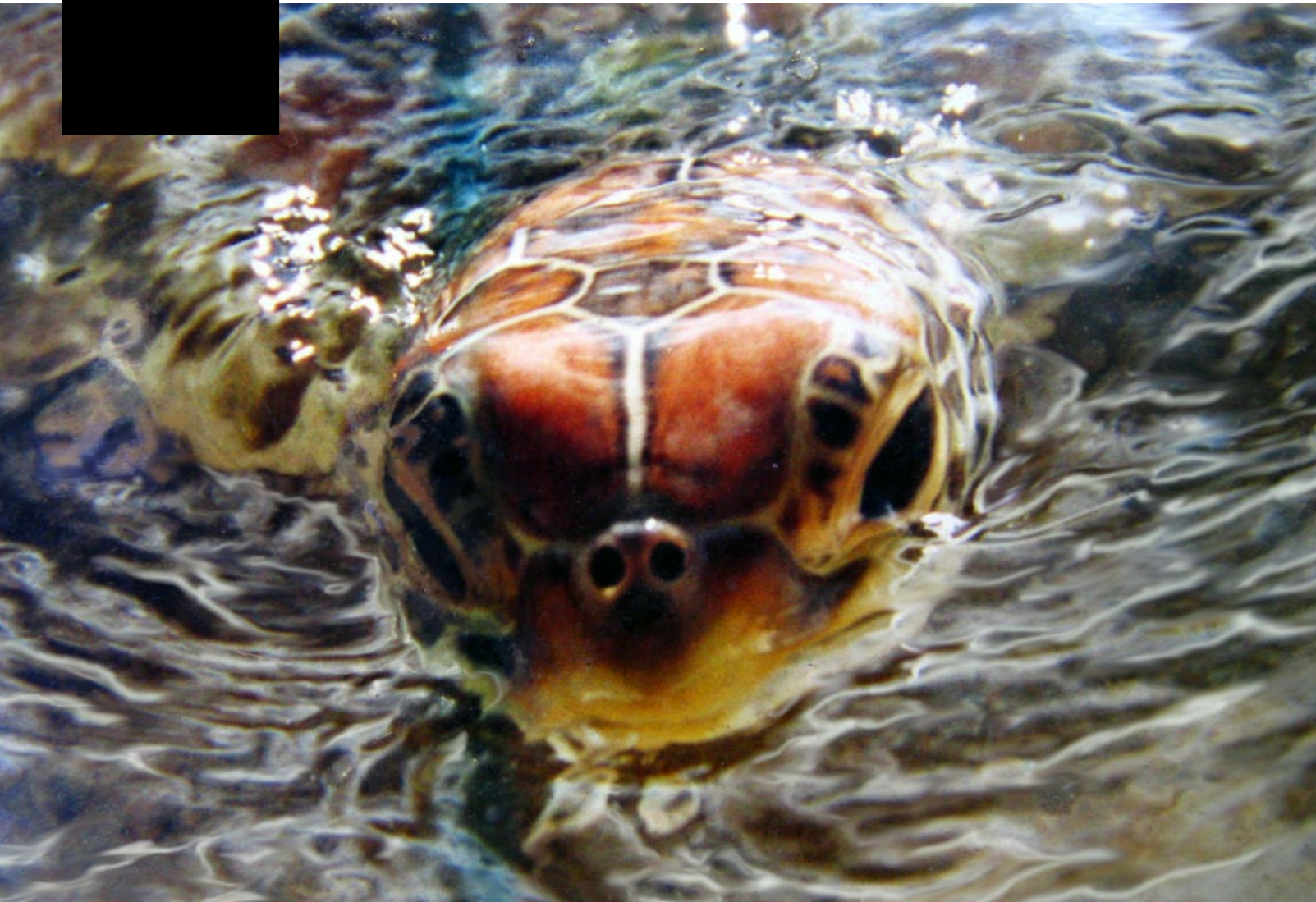


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Merlin, the young sea turtle, with flippers slack when he was very ill



The local reefs in Opunohu Bay of Moorea (right); Merlin, coming forward, looking above the surface, wanting constant attention (below)



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Sea Turtle

government holding facility at once and said that someone would come by later that day to pick him up.

After he had gone, I carried Merlin into the house and laid him on cushions, while filling his blue basin with seawater in a dark room at the back of the house. Then I locked the doors, pulled all the curtains, and sat down beside him with my latest drawing propped in front of me.

Merlin threw a violent fit to find himself back in his basin in the house, and splashed so much sea water around that it took the next twenty minutes to clean it up. Finally, he calmed down as I sat stroking him, alert and listening. I was terrified. Not being French, I

Craving attention

He wanted continuous attention and came to me whenever he saw me. Floating in his pool, he gazed up at the trees arching over him, the mountains and sky, and he watched anyone in view while scenting the air. It was a strange phenomenon, a marine reptile so exquisitely adapted to marine life, whose interests suddenly lay in the world above the surface.

I spent hours drawing the patterns of his scales, and for that, I needed a side view. But he would swim towards me and rest his chin on the edge of the

pool. I would stroke him, and give him a shellfish, but when I tried again for the side view, he turned with me. He wanted as much attention as he could get, and day after day I spent more time fussing with him than I did drawing him. Usually while he was occupied with his bit of food, I could draw him uninterrupted for a few moments, but not for long.

Once, my patience was wearing thin, and instead of getting him more shellfish, I gave him some lettuce that happened to be handy. He shook his head and spat it

out, then violently smacked his flippers on the surface several times and turned his back on me. Now, try as I might to get the side view, he kept his tail end turned exactly in my direction! It took him fifteen minutes to get over his fit of pique and drift back towards me again.

This unexpected incident suggested that he had ideas and preferences that very much mattered to him!

Trouble

One day, a stranger came by, saw Merlin, and went uninvited

to look at him. Two days later, he returned with another man, who claimed to be a government authority on sea turtles and demanded to see the one I had in custody. As we walked to Merlin's pool, I told the man his history, but he stated coldly that I had no right to keep him, snatched Merlin from the water, and roughly examined him. I said that my husband (who, I mentioned, spoke French without an accent), had called every branch of the government to ask for advice and help, but had failed to find anyone who could advise us about his care. (And being in a remote location, there was no access to the internet at the time, through which information such as this could be found). So, we had been obliged to treat the stricken reptile on our own.

Then, I asked him what a healthy turtle's respiratory rate should be, but he ignored the question. Anxious to learn, since he was the first sea turtle expert I had met, I asked again. He said it depended.

"But when a healthy animal is at rest," I asked, "how often does it breathe?" Again, he replied vaguely, and I realised that he did not know! He told me brusquely that the turtle would be transferred to a



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The author, face-to-face with Merlin, the young sea turtle



As he grew stronger, Merlin ventured farther away and was harder to find.

Sea Turtle

The official informed Franck that there was now a veterinarian charged with overseeing sea turtle cases, and she put Franck in touch with him. Not long after, the newspaper reported that all the sea turtles in that facility had died because of poor care.

Likely, the so-called turtle expert and his friend had planned to cook Merlin for dinner.

Merlin's recovery

We constructed an enclosure for Merlin on the fringe reef, and tried to get him used to it. But instead of exploring, he floated in the corner nearest the house in a cloud of fish, looking up at the house. He must have been lonely after so much attention close to us, in his pool.

But as time passed, he began exploring his enclosure and drifting in the middle, finning against the waves.

So I tied a coconut frond there for him to hold on to. Once, when high waters lifted him over his fence, he circled it, then swam to the beach.

At sunset, I carried him to the shallows and softly scrubbed him to keep algae from growing on his skin and shell. He had been sick for so long that in the tropical warmth it had become a problem. Merlin followed my movements with delicate touches of his wings and as I brushed his ventral shell, he clutched my hand for support. The delicate, curved bones in his hind fins shaped them like fingers so that it felt, each night, as if a small, human-like creature grasped my hand between his two, with cool, gentle fingers.

When the sea was too high, the waves too exhausting, or the sun too hot on his exposed shell, Merlin stayed in his pool where he was comfortable.

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was uncertain if I had any human rights in the country, and was afraid that if I was caught breaking any laws, such as the one governing the touching of sea turtles, I could be deported.

On the other hand, while the rest of the world was working to save sea turtles from extinction, in Tahiti, the law tolerated people eating just as many as they wanted. They were very religious and believed that God had put sea turtles in the sea just for them to eat—even the very last one! But it was wrong to try to save one from death. I waited, trembling with anxiety, systematically drawing. The day darkened, and eventually I just looked out across the grey sea, comforting Merlin. When I was beginning to think that I had overreacted, a vehicle drove onto the lawn. I could hear it but dared not look.

There was a loud knock on the door, and in the subsequent silence, a man began yelling, "Allô!" Listening intently, I followed his progress around the house, imagining making a plea to a judge on Merlin's behalf. Only I knew his needs and it would endanger him, after all he had been through, to put him into a strange facility. Surely, I was in the right... Footsteps approached along the deck. Merlin's pool, decorated with seaweeds, sponges, and the seashell he liked to clutch, was empty, and the man paused there a long time. Then the footsteps retreated, the car door slammed, and finally the sound of the motor faded.

When Franck got home from work, he called the Department of the Sea and was told that they knew of no one who had been dispatched to take the turtle. The only sea turtle holding facility was on another island.



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Corals on the reefs of Moorea (above and left)

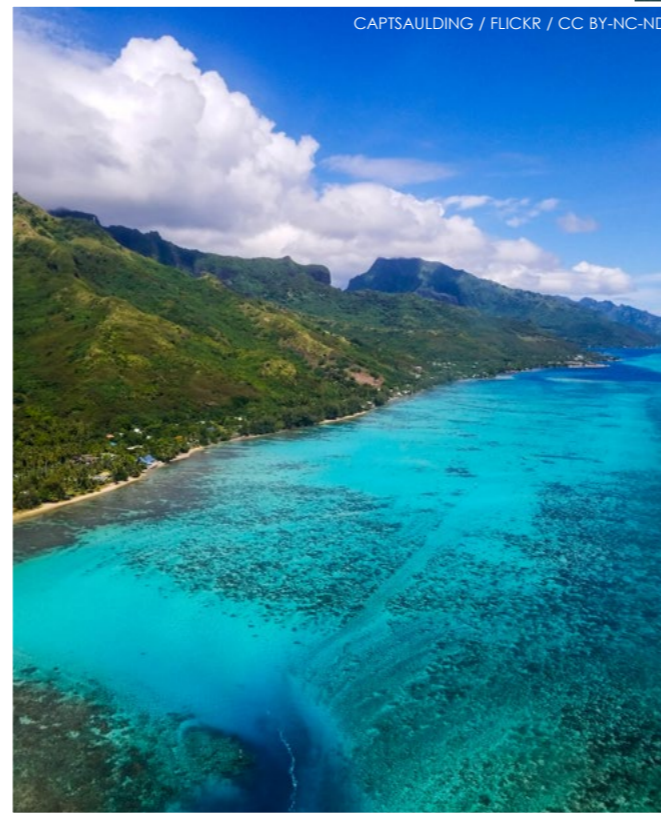


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Fringing reefs of Moorea (above and left); Merlin, swimming with the jackfish that accompanied him (right and bottom left)



Sea Turtle

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His limbs were filling with muscle and daily he was becoming stronger and more alert. The bones of his wings extended like those of a bird, as he subtly altered their shape to push against the water. His move-

ments were graceful as the flow of water itself. But, while some days he floated lower than others, there had been little change in his buoyancy over the three months he had spent with us.

He wanted to eat almost continuously, and providing him with good food was increasingly problematic. He came with me when I searched for food for him, and when I saw something promising, I carried him down to the reef to see if it interested him. The outings stimulated him and gave him a chance to see his environment, but we discovered no new foods that way.

Pool time

Each evening, I cleaned his pool and changed his water so it would be the same temperature as the sea he had just left. The air was always colder than the sea, so his pool gradu-

ally cooled to the temperature of the air. His reptilian body acquired the temperature of his surroundings, and I felt he should not be subjected to a sudden temperature change. But I did not know what the best temperature was. One night, my back was too painful to carry the many bucketfuls of seawater to fill his pool, so Franck said he would do it when he got home.

But by the time he arrived, Merlin had waited an extra two hours, and it was dark. He was very upset and threw a tantrum, beating the surface of his pool with his wings as violently as he could, driving himself into the side, spinning wildly, and thrashing. But Franck had brought a bonito (an oceanic fish) for him, and when I held a piece of it in front of him, he grabbed it. Suddenly, he was thrilled and ate an astonishing number of pieces.

After that, I filled a large serving bowl with a mixture of cubed bonito, several crushed, boiled potatoes, cooked spinach, and lettuce, each morning. A second bowl was heaped with the

seaweeds he liked. Merlin consumed the contents of both each day.

Flying in the sea

One morning, when I carried him down to look at some seaweeds, for the first time, he flew along the sea floor, easily following its contours for several metres before slowly rising to the surface. He was too breathless to repeat the performance, but he had finally succeeded, if briefly, in achieving neutral buoyancy.

Hours later, the wind began to rage, and all night long, the atmosphere screamed. I awoke late in the morning, for no birds sang. Monstrous brown waves tore down the bay, wreckage covered the shore, and a thick layer of sand had been deposited far up under the house. Merlin was hiding at the bottom of his pool. His enclosure was gone, and the sea was far too wild to take him out. For several days, he had to stay in his pool while torrential rain fell and the wind howled. He returned to the surface

and remained afloat.

I took him out as soon as the sea calmed and found that he stayed in front of the house, so rebuilding the enclosure was unnecessary. When he wanted to eat, he came to the beach and if I did not appear immediately, he came clambering out of the water to find me.

So, I transferred the sketches I had done when he was ill onto a board prepared for something else, and started a painting of him right then and there, so I would not have to leave the deck from which I could watch over my precious sea turtle. From then on, he went into the sea each morning, and spent his days playing on the fringe reef.

A watchful animal

At times, he was able to submerge when we searched for his foods, and then he became a different animal. For the first time, I glimpsed the alert, watchful being he truly was. With his wings, he would stroke down to inves-



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A stonefish joined Merlin's community of fishes (right): Portrait painting of Merlin by Ila France Porcher (far right) Merlin's favorite shellfish, a red stripe trochus snail, *Trochus histrio*. Painting by Ila France Porcher (bottom right)



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to investigate a crevice in the coral, then when he began to rise, he would stroke again, moving on to look into another crevice. But it was never long before he returned to the surface.

Once, I took him with me when I dived down the wall at the drop-off, thinking that he would like the deep, dark water. But he panicked and swam up over the fringe reef and

back to the beach by himself.

Often, he played in the waves on the beach. At first, I rushed down to rescue him, gently putting him back beyond the breaking waves, only to see him come surfing up again a few waves later. It seemed that he liked to play where he could touch the bottom. He began surfing on the beach each evening while I prepared his pool for the night, sometimes clambering up towards me. He was always eager to return to his pool as night came.

The veterinarian comes

After a long delay, the government's official sea turtle veterinarian arrived. I extricated Merlin from his floating coconut frond with difficulty and carried him to the vet, who stood watching on the shore. He was very gentle and his examination was brief. As he set Merlin back in the sea, he told us that Merlin was the healthiest turtle he had seen in custody. Considering how ill he had been, it was the opposite of what he had expected.

We stood talking in the shallows and Merlin stayed nearby, often coming close to touch our legs, seeking attention. The vet was impressed with his freedom, his trusting behaviour, and the way he used the toys we

had tied up for him. He said he was glad to know that there were people able to care for these specialised marine reptiles and that he would keep us in mind in the future if a temporary home for a sea turtle was needed. He left Merlin's release up to us.

Merlin's character

Merlin began to explore more widely. He discovered an anchor

rope floating about fifteen metres (50 ft) up the shore and began going there to play. One day, I noticed a fisherman in an outrigger canoe cruising slowly past him, so after that, whenever I saw him playing there, I took him looking for food so that he would not make it a habit.

But Merlin did not like to accompany me when I searched for his seaweeds, and he became

increasingly adamant that I respect his wishes. Though he came passively in the beginning, he began experimenting with various escape strategies. He would swim along while I had my arm around him, but once I let go, he would whip his wing out of my reach and take evasive action with surprising rapidity. When he was especially irritated, he would smack my hand with his wing as I reached out to guide him in the proper direction.

Eventually, he began taking off for home as fast as he could when I dived down to pick some seaweed,



Ila



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Damselfish, such as this one, followed Merlin around.



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ecology



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Merlin's community of fishes included jackfish (above) and ornate butterflyfish (left)

and I would have to speed after him and turn the protesting sea turtle around to

continue our search. He could be very hard to see since he was often able to swim

just beneath the concealing reflections of the surface.

Once, he vanished altogether and it was a long time before I saw him climbing up the beach in the distance. There was no doubt about his intentions; every time a wave touched his hind fins, he hoisted himself farther up the beach and eventually, like a little bulldozer, he struggled to the top, where he was partially hidden in shrubbery.

After that, I procured his seaweed by myself. Yet there were still times when we were swimming together that he suddenly flew home alone. No matter where we were, Merlin always knew where home was.



Opunohu Bay, where Merlin was rehabilitated and wild dolphins played (above). Painting by Ila France Porcher

One night, I was giving him a last feeding in his pool. He was a barely perceptible dark shape, and I fed him by feel, enjoying the delicate touch of his jaws against my fingers. Suddenly, he spun around and snapped something off the other side of the pool, which he began wildly shaking. It was a leaf that had fallen—he was remarkably sensitive to vibration. Yet, during the day, leaves frequently fell into his pool, and he paid no attention to them.

At night, if he was approached, or if a light came on, he would assume a protective position. He would tuck his wings tightly over the edges

of his shell, arch his neck so his face pointed downward, and extend his hind fins out from his body, fingers spread. Stroking him gently did not relax him.

Merlin's fish

One evening, I was carrying Merlin in for the night when the extraordinary face of a stonefish flashed past beneath us, just past the place where we came and went from the sea. It was a large one, with seaweed growing on it. It remained in the vicinity for several weeks, rarely moving, even when we went close to watch it.

Merlin's multispecies cloud of fish was always present

and partook of the scattering crumbs when he ate. Yet there was no greedy rush forward in spite of the hundreds of individuals; in deeper water, they filled the volume of a room. The most alert were small silver jackfish. They appeared around me as I put on my gear in the shallows and as I glided out, they surrounded me in formation, with the leaders a metre in front, escorting me to Merlin.

Some of them always came with me when I returned to the beach, a few taking the lead, while others swam companionably around me. They came too, when Merlin and I roamed together, but if he wandered too far away, they would not



Sea turtle in the open sea (right); A whitetip reef shark was part of Merlin's community of fishes (below)



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follow. When looking for him, scanning the water from the shore, I would often see them coming back, which told me the direction he had taken.

Those small animals seemed to form a community in which I was accepted and welcomed, something I had never known, in spite of the time I had spent observing terrestrial wildlife as a wildlife artist. The presence of the stonefish so close to our feeding area was unlikely to be a coincidence. It too was part of the community.

One day, Franck went to fetch Merlin in his kayak when he strayed too far. I was waiting on the beach with Merlin's fish, and they all went streaming out to meet the kayak when it was still ten metres (32 ft) away! When Merlin was placed back into the sea, they flashed around him like cascading silver coins. And as

he raised his wings and surged away, they took up their positions around him. As many as possible clustered against his ventral shell, likely for protection.

A striking incident illustrating the faculties of Merlin's fish occurred one day when I was walking on rocks lining the shore. His fish came streaming over and milled around in the water below me. They clearly recognised me from under the surface, though they had not seen me there before, and I looked very different fully dressed and standing on the rocks above, than I did when underwater. Those fish were remarkably intelligent.

Then, one morning when I looked out, Merlin had vanished... ■

Read the rest of Merlin's endearing and gripping tale in Part Two, filled with poignant

moments in tropical seas, insights into surprising reptilian intelligence and sentience, while facing the ever-present perils posed by hunters. Go to: xray-mag.com. Or buy the full ebook or paperback at: amazon.com.

Ethologist Ila France Porcher, author of *The Shark Sessions* and *The True Nature of Sharks*, conducted a seven-year study of a four-species reef shark community in Tahiti and has studied sharks in Florida with shark-encounter pioneer Jim Abernethy. Her observations, which are the first of their kind, have yielded valuable details about sharks' reproductive cycles, social biology, population structure, daily behaviour patterns, roaming tendencies and cognitive abilities. Visit: ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com/author.

Available Now in paperback or ebook

From author, ethologist, wildlife artist and rehabilitator Ila France Porcher

The lives of sea turtles in the context of a society that hunts them are revealed in vivid words in this account of what happened to four sea turtles in Tahiti. Their actions in different situations provide a revealing glimpse into their minds.

These exquisitely designed marine reptiles were able to plan ahead, cooperate against their own instinctive drives, and use deceptive strategies. They remembered abuse, took steps to try to avoid more suffering, and their behaviour was flexible according to the circumstances. Such evidence of their self-awareness, and conscious approach to life, provides another reason to insist on their protection from extinction.

While the intelligent awareness and emotional nature of our pets is accepted increasingly in our society, a strong prejudice lingers against the idea that animals considered "cold" and "low," such as fish, amphibians and reptiles, could be sentient. This book shows how mistaken such an attitude really is.

MERLIN



The Mind of a
SEA TURTLE

ILA FRANCE PORCHER

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