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Marine Turtle Newsletter 94:11, © 2001

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An Oft Told Story: Man's Impact on Green Turtles in the Caribbean, Circa 1720

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During a recent foray through a private, rare book collection, the following factual, as well as fanciful, item by William Smith (1745) was discovered. We believe that one passage from his delightful natural history notes is worth quoting in its entirety not only for its historical significance, but also the mention of man's impact on sea turtles at the Caribbean island of Nevis and other nearby islands, circa 1720. His discourse follows:

“There are seven or eight kinds of Turtle, alias Tortoise, though but one of them eatable, which is called Green Turtle, because its fat is of a green colour, and not of the sort, whose Shell serves for Snuff-Boxes. They are so common that they need no description; and the manner of catching them at Nevis is as follows. When a person sees any of their Tracks in the Sea Sands, he next Night sits up to watch, and turn them upon their Backs, and then they are quite helpless. Their blood is cold; and upon opening one of them, I have seen, at least, two hundred Eggs that are exactly round, (like a School-boy's Marble) taken out of it, about forty of which were enclosed in whitish tough skins, with a water-coloured, or jellyish substance round the Yolk, and were ready to be laid at one time. Woods Rogers, page 276 (*), saw at the Islands, called Tres Marias, in the South Sea, a Turtle that had at least eight hundred Eggs in its Belly, a hundred and fifty of which were skinned, and ready for laying at once. The Turtle lays them close to the Sea, which has there, very small Ebbings and Flowings, and covering them lightly with Sand, leaves them to be hatched by the Sun's warm Beams: And this is effected in eight and forty hour's time, as I was informed by those who made it their business to fetch them from Maroon uninhabited Islands, where they are vastly plentiful, and where they see almost every day, great numbers of young ones, not broader than a Shilling, newly hatched, hastening down into the Sea. Woods Rogers asserts the same. As they are disturbed so much at Nevis, and other inhabited Islands, they seldom care to come a shore there.”

Smith's (1745) observations are in part remarkably accurate. We can only truly find two inaccuracies. Firstly, the only Tres Marias Islands of which we are aware are those off the Pacific coast of Mexico, immediately south of the Gulf of California (21oN, 106oW) and secondly, the 48 hour incubation duration described is undoubtedly a misconception.

* The author's reference to Woods Rogers (page 276) is an older form of referencing past literature, which in modern parlance would likely appear as: Rogers (17xx, page 276). Unfortunately, we have been unable to acquire a copy or proper citation of the Woods Rogers publication that Mr. Smith is referring to in the above passage.

SMITH, W. 1745. A natural history of Nevis, And the rest of the English Leeward Charibee Islands in America. With many other observations on nature and art: Particularly, An Introduction to the Art of Decyphering. In, Eleven Letters from the Revd Mr. Smith, sometime Rector of St. John's at Nevis, and now Rector of St. Mary's in Bedford; to the Revd Mr. Mason, B.D. Woodwardian Professor, and Fellow of Trinity-College, in Cambridge. Cambridge, J. Bentham. 327 pp. [Letter VIII, paragraph 17, pp. 196-198.]