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Two-thirds of giant sea turtles that reach Ghana's beaches are killed

**By Kwaku Sakyi-Addo in Accra**

Environmentalists in Ghana are to set up six sanctuaries along the country's Atlantic coast to save the endangered giant sea turtle.

The Ghana Wildlife Society has launched a campaign to raise nearly \$20,000 for the protection of beaches where several hundred giant sea turtles come to lay millions of eggs.

Their nesting season lasts from August to March every year.

Sadly, wildlife activists estimate that at least two-thirds of turtles that swim up onto the coast of Ghana are caught and slaughtered by local fishermen for food.

**Extinction**

The giant sea turtles cross the ocean, often from as far away as South America, to the soft, sandy and warm tropical beaches of Ghana which are more suitable for hatching their eggs.

Domestic animals, such as dogs and pigs, also dig up and eat or destroy more than one million eggs every season.

The turtle's empty carapace, or shell, is used as decorative pieces in their homes, or as containers for holding water and food.

"If people continue with this spate of killing nesting turtles and destroying their eggs, they'll be destroying generations of turtles and their offspring and pushing these wonderful reptiles into extinction," says project officer of the Ghana Wildlife Society, Gerrard Osei Boakye.

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However feasible turtle-driven eco-tourism might be, it is a rather distant prospect for ordinary fishermen such as 35-year-old Nii Ashietey.

He sees the giant sea turtle simply as a massive piece of meat to be charcoal-grilled and eaten, or sold and the cash spent to send his little daughter to school or hospital.

"If my daughter is sick or I have to pay school fees and this animal comes to our beach, then I have to catch it and kill it because people like the meat," argues Ashietey, who says he has done precisely that on two occasions.

The Ghana Wildlife Society is worried that given the current rate of killing the turtles, they will soon be extinct.

The society is mounting colourful turtle billboards along some roads in the capital just a few minutes from the beaches to help raise public awareness.

### The Ningo ritual

They are also recruiting 2,000 new members into the Society by the end of this year in a campaign appropriately called "The 2000X2000 Campaign," which will rope in locals who will be expected to protect the turtles, their eggs and hatchlings within the fishing communities.

Interestingly, among the Ga-Adangbe people of Ningo, 60km east of Accra, giant sea turtles are regarded as sacred.

The elders perform rituals for the ancient reptiles when they come ashore, without harming them.

Of course, the wildlife activists don't see the giant sea turtle in quite the same spiritual light; but they are in no hurry to turn the beliefs of the Ningo people around.



Massive campaign launched to raise public awareness



Many turtles end up on dinner plates



And shells are used for decoration or carrying food

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