

## Sangalaki, the birthplace of turtles



*How deep can you go: A green sea turtle digs a nest for its eggs on the beach of Sangalaki Island, East Kalimantan.*

The dark sky was studded with thousands of stars when a green sea turtle slowly clambered up to the shore of Sangalaki Island, Derawan Islands, East Kalimantan. Its four legs were pacing laboriously under its body weight, which can reach up to 100 kilograms, to find a place where it could lay its eggs. Most turtles are very slow on land, but they are among the best swimmers in the sea.

About 10 meters from the shoreline, the turtle stopped for a moment. Sand was being scattered all around, as its legs dug a hole into which it would lay its eggs to generate its offspring. After digging some 65 centimeters in depth, the turtle started laying its eggs, one by one. "The total reaches a hundred on average," said Ahang, an officer of the Berau Turtle Foundation.

This 15-hectare island is known as the largest turtle egg-laying environments in Southeast Asia. Every night when the tide rises, dozens of turtles lay their eggs. Therefore, tourists visiting Sangalaki are guaranteed to witness the spectacle. "Its peak lasts from August until September, when one can find up to 40 turtle nests in one night," he added.

Ahang and his colleagues from the East Kalimantan Natural Resources Conservation Agency will dig up and relocate the eggs if they find some nests too close to the edge of the shore, so that the hatchlings from the eggs are not threatened. This is called a semi-natural process, because turtles lay eggs without human intervention, and the eggs will only be moved if they are considered to be under threat.

Within 60 days, the eggs will hatch and young turtles, locally called tukik, will emerge from the sand. "By instinct, they will crawl toward the shore, and swim into the open sea," Ahang pointed out. As they crawl toward the sea, the cute baby turtles are under threat from predators such as lizards, eagles, crabs and fish — all of which are ready to prey on them.

But humans are actually the real threat. Some people still think that turtle eggs are abundant, and are therefore safe to exploit for both consumption, as well as for decorations and souvenirs. "In fact, a turtle will only lay eggs for the first time when it reaches 40 or 50 years of age," explained Ahang. This factor causes the slow reproductive process of the reptile, which has a lifespan of over 100 years. His message for everyone is: "Please don't buy gifts made from turtles!"