

Vanuatu Turtle Tagging for Tradition and Tourism

Vanuatu
Chris Bartlett



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Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Vanuatu Tagging Turtles for Tradition and Tourism at the Nguna-Pele Marine Protected Area gives eco-tourists the opportunity to tag and release wild-caught sea turtles. At the same time it encourages traditional hunters to continue practicing their age-old custom, but for conservation rather than consumption. Visitors interact with village expert turtle hunters and learn about their way of life and local knowledge on sea turtle biology. Turtle Sponsors are presented with a certificate recognizing their financial contribution and detailing the biological particulars of their individual turtle. The name of the sponsor and the turtle are placed on the Nguna-Pele MPA's website, and the information is passed to an international conservation database. Turtle fishermen and their villages receive sponsorship money, which acts as a direct incentive for hunters to tag rather than consume sea turtles. The annual number of sea turtles tagged has quadrupled since the introduction of this initiative, with sea turtle sponsorships considerably elevating village income and development. The initiative has maintained the cultural identity surrounding turtle hunting and strengthened the desire among younger generations to learn these customary practices, with an innovative twist.

Your idea

This will be the address used to plot your entry on the map.

Street Address

Pele Island

City

Port Vila

State/Province

SHEFA

Postal/Zip Code

0007

Country**Year innovation began**

2002

Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant

Quality of tourism management and impact on the destination

Place your video embed code here from YouTube, Google Video and other video sharing websites. [How to embed a video from YouTube.](#)

Paste your code here

Indicate sector in which you principally work

Community Organization

Geographic location

Rural, Coast.

Plot your innovation within the Mosaic of Solutions

Main barrier addressed

Cross-cultural myopia

Main insight addressed

Establish community incentives

Innovation**What is the goal of your innovation?**

Maintain Vanuatu's culture and traditional knowledge while protecting an endangered sea turtle species and facilitate a world-class tourism experience.

How does your approach support or embody geotourism?

The Turtle-Tagging for Tradition and Tourism initiative is the very essence of geotourism: tourism that enhances the unique traditional character Vanuatu -its underwater diversity, its ancient indigenous customs, its cultural heritage, and the well-being and social development of its residents. Our initiative conserves one of the world's most distinctive places, and distinctive species. Embodying geotourism, our integrative approach facilitates ideological exchange and solutions to complex, real-world issues like loss of sea turtle biodiversity and loss of indigenous Pacific culture. Through this cross-cultural turtle tagging program, both locals and visitors gain wisdom and knowledge, which has simultaneously achieved the goals of conservationists, local peoples and guests. Our eco-tourism initiative motivates the preservation of Vanuatu's unique marine and cultural resources, while presenting economic opportunity to globally disadvantaged people. Our project is truly innovative, demonstrating how tourism does the most good: presenting a unique solution to long-enduring and seemingly inscrutable issues. This turtle tagging program brings pride to local residents and to the country as a whole, showing the world how our local knowledge and traditions can be of global conservation value. Working together with travelers and conservationists, our communities have designed a sustainable model that protects and enhances the world's heritage.

Describe your approach in detail. How is it innovative?

The approach is very simple: villagers want to maintain sea turtle hunting culture and identity. Conservationists want to reduce the number of sea turtles killed. Tourism provides the mechanism to simultaneously achieve these two seemingly contradictory goals. Traditional turtle hunters catch a sea turtle on the reef and bring it to the Nguna-Pele Marine Protected Area. Eco-tourists arriving the next day are given the chance to interact with the turtle in a holding tank while the sponsorship program is explained. Once a sponsor is identified, s/he is fully involved in the scientific measurement and tagging of the turtle. Knowledgeable local experts describe the hunt and answer questions about sea turtle biology and conservation. The sponsor names the turtle, and is given a certificate with its tagging details. The wild turtle is brought to the beach and released to much applause and enjoyment. Sponsorship money is divided among the hunter, the village conservation committee, and the NPMPA. Sponsor/turtle details are put on the NPMPA website and passed conservation groups. The hunter maintains tradition and passes it to future generations. Our innovative approach succeeds where previous tagging and conservation efforts did not: cultural identity is strengthened, eco-tourism flourishes and turtles are protected.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

In order to spread this innovation to more communities throughout Vanuatu where tourism does not reach, we require partnerships with individuals who can set up a virtual tagging hub. In this way, people can pre-sponsor turtles through the internet, and get photos, species info and certificates back without ever traveling to these remote communities. Similarly, remote communities can economically benefit from tourism which logistically would otherwise never reach them. As tourism tends to stay close to the capital city in Vanuatu, a virtual tagging partnership could spread benefits of this innovation throughout Vanuatu's 84 islands.

Impact**In one sentence describe what kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.**

We intend to change the focus of international conservation efforts towards multifaceted environmental, economic and cultural development of island communities.

Describe the degree of success of your approach to date. Clearly define how you measure quantitative and qualitative impact in terms of how your approach contributes to the sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How

does your approach minimize negative impacts? 200 words or less

This initiative has proven to be one of the most important activities the Nguna-Pele MPA has ever carried out. But like any project it has experienced its share of growing pains. Getting processes and agreements in place among 16 communities, and equitably sharing benefits is no easy task, but over the last four years, we have been able to continually improve the initiative to a system accepted by all. Its improvement continues to this day, and will continue to evolve and be strengthened into the future. Quantitatively we have seen the number of turtles tagged each year increase four fold. Individual village conservation committees and the NPMPA have, for the first time, been able to derive a regular and sustainable source of income. The number of sea turtles consumed among all villages on the two islands has declined to under five each year. Qualitatively, the people of Nguna and Pele have great pride in their innovative efforts to both preserve an endangered species and an endangered cultural heritage and way of life. Our initiative can undoubtedly be considered a success in progress for its innovative approach to solve environmental and social concerns through low-impact and sustainable tourism.

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

Very few people from North America, Europe or Asia have had the chance to interact with a live endangered sea turtle. Travelers who visit Nguna and Pele often cite turtle tagging as the most memorable part of their entire stay. The initiative gives visitors a sense of contributing to a larger conservation issue. Our approach also engenders a broader view of conservation than is typically presented; that indigenous people have strong cultural connections to resources, and one-sided conservation intervention can have serious consequences on their cultural identity. Conversely, through engagement, villagers see the value of turtles to the global community.

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your innovation, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

The NPMPA is fully managed by an island ni-Vanuatu executive committee. All activities are therefore designed and implemented by local people. The organization itself began in 2002 as a joint initiative among four village chiefs. As evidence of the overwhelming response and community benefit, the NPMPA now includes 16 member villages, and is leading several conservation and tourism initiatives. In addition, villages throughout the country have requested assistance from the NPMPA in designing and operating their own village eco-tourism projects. The turtle-tagging initiative is run completely by village people, and the approach belongs exclusively to the community.

Describe how your innovation helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area's cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues. How do you motivate them to act responsibly in their future travel decisions?

Economic benefit is a major incentive for locals to tag rather than consume turtles, while still maintaining the cultural traditions of turtle hunting. Most important however is the exchange of ideas facilitated by exposing overseas travelers to turtle hunters and vice versa. Turtle hunters witness first-hand the value this resource has to people in countries with no coastline, while overseas guests understand the cultural association hunters have with turtles. Visitors learn much from expert hunters. Travelers are encouraged to take a broader view of conservation, and support destinations that promote social and cultural justice in addition to environmental conservation.

Sustainability

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? What is the potential demand for your innovation?

Management by locals from villages on both islands led to this initiative's success over the long-term. All activities are thereby locally-appropriate and equitably distributed among communities. Sustainability is also due to the NPMPA's voluntary nature; member communities and conservation committees work without pay, but are motivated by the community and individual accumulation of benefits of working together. Sea turtle tagging and sponsorship can only be achieved through collaboration, therefore the demand for this partnership is growing among communities and eco-tourists alike. As economic cultural and economic benefits improve, communities become empowered to take more responsibility for local biodiversity.

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

The NPMPA earns a significant portion of its outreach budget through eco-tourism and the turtle-tagging initiative. During some years, sea turtle revenue has made up the entire operating budget of the organization. As decreed in our mandate however, the vast majority of economic benefit of tourism flows directly to communities. The Nguna-Pele MPA depends heavily on locally available materials and support from volunteer human resources. Educational outreach, ecological monitoring, village cleanups, workshops, turtle tagging, invasive species eradication and much more is accomplished for less than \$5,000USD per year. Additional grants for specific projects like renewable energy, mariculture and scientific surveys are sought on a regular basis. The Nguna-Pele MPA has a single salaried local manager with several part-time volunteer staff to carry out the mandates of the organization, however hundreds of village volunteers do the majority of on-the ground conservation work.

What is your plan to expand your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

The success of the NPMPA has facilitated the current planning of a provincial network in association with local NGO's and the national government to expand our conservation and tourism work. Several communities on nearby islands, have heard about and initiated their own sea-turtle tagging projects for tourists. Joined within a single provincial network, we plan to improve sea turtle conservation practice, share cultural and technical insights, and heighten the experience to our visitors. Wisdom of the national government in supporting initiatives like ours, has allowed Vanuatu to become known as a prime cultural and environmental destination in the Pacific.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

Villages on Nguna and Pele islands speak the same language, have strong familial links, and have pledged their support to working together for conservation and tourism benefit. However, in order for the turtle-tagging approach to be widely applied, the NPMPA requires a consistent and improved process for 1) promoting the destination to eco-tourists 2) providing feedback to tourists about their turtle after their departure and 3) maintaining up-to-date turtle information on the world-wide web. These points are often extremely difficult for island project personnel. Our innovation could be replicated elsewhere by partnering with an external collaborator, outsourcing the overly-technical parts of this initiative. For example, the NPMPA would communicate turtle taggings and recaptures to a future partner who would then put this information on the web, and communicate in English to eco-visitors about their turtle. In this way, economic benefit is obtained by even the most remote communities, while eco-visitors can virtually participate in local conservation. In order for our initiative to have maximal impact, we need to extend our collaborative network across geographical and technical barriers to willing and motivated people who wish to contribute expertise.

The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell your story.

Nguna and Pele islands lie in a special geographic location within the Republic of Vanuatu; close enough to the capital city of Port Vila to benefit from the massive surge in tourism to the country, yet far enough away to retain strong village-identity and culture. They have been fertile ground for some of the nation's most exciting innovations, as these communities walk the tightrope of embracing development and maintaining cultural identity. The Nguna-Pele Marine Protected area organization began in 2002 as a joint initiative among village chiefs on Nguna and Pele to strengthen local conservation and development projects.

Sea turtles are undoubtedly Vanuatu's most iconic species, yet also its most threatened. Throughout Oceania, where sea turtles have traditionally been hunted for millennia, sea turtles are now at precipitously low levels, with many biologists predicting their eminent extinction unless sea turtle harvest is reduced dramatically. Many local and international groups now promote sea turtle conservation in Vanuatu, spreading awareness and pleading with communities to reduce turtle harvest. One local NGO passes out turtle tagging equipment to many communities in the hopes they will tag nesting turtles for science. Sea turtle harvest, however, is not simply hunting for food. The act of catching sea turtles and the close association between islanders and sea turtles transcends the consumption of turtle meat. Pure conservationists have missed this very important connection, which led to low local participation in tagging activities.

Our Turtle-Tagging-for-Tradition-and-Tourists initiative began in 2002 when a visitor caught site of local men hauling a large sea turtle up the beach. They had caught the turtle on the reef and were holding onto it before the tagging gear arrived. No one in the village had thought that the visitor might like to see the turtle before it was tagged. The visitor rushed over and asked many questions, which the islanders proudly answered in broken English. She had never before seen a sea turtle, this iconic and gentle animal, let alone touch and hold it. When the tagging gear arrived, she was asked to hold the turtle's flipper while it was tagged, and upon release, was the last person to caress it as it swam away into the blue. She was moved to tears by her experience, and before leaving the island gave each of the turtle fisherman \$50 in thanks.

The Nguna-Pele MPA, through this turtle tagging initiative, provides an innovative way for turtle fisherman to maintain their identity and even pass it onto their children. Many more islanders are interested in learning this traditional practice because of its cultural and now economic benefits. The annual number of turtles tagged has more than quadrupled. Rather than being consumed, turtles are now tagged, released and sponsored by tourists. Visitors to Nguna and Pele islands have an opportunity to interact with a live endangered sea turtle, with the more adventurous even taking part in the hunt. Overall, cultural identity has been strengthened, eco-tourism is flourishing while sea turtles are being protected.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers' marketing material.

Charley Manua is one of the original sea turtle hunters and taggers on Nguna and Pele. He is also the longest serving staff member of the Nguna-Pele MPA. He was integral in establishing the area's first marine reserves, and has been invited to represent Vanuatu at sea turtle conferences throughout the Pacific. Christopher Bartlett began working with the people of Nguna and Pele in 2002 as a US Peace Corps volunteer. He is in the final months of his PhD at James Cook University in Australia, where his dissertation examines the contemporary marine management practices of Melanesian communities.

Please write an overview of your project. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the Google map located on the competition homepage.

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