





| DEFENDING  
*Bangkaru*

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*On a remote island in Indonesia, rangers are turning the tide on turtle egg poaching, safeguarding the future of an ancient population of greens and leatherbacks.*

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**W**e set off from the ranger camp after eating dinner. Although it was well into the night, the walk through Bangkaru's forest is a sweaty business. During the day, the trees provide welcome shade, but at night they seem to breathe out warm moist air. This humid tropic climate and pristine primary forest means Bangkaru is home to an abundance of frogs and insects that, when night comes, produce a cacophony of orchestral proportion.

After a 30-minute torchlit trek, we stepped out from the forest onto the beach. Lightning flashed over the sea in front and over the mountains behind, illuminating rock formations and trees, and casting dramatic flashing shadows over the pure white moonlit sand.

The ranger patrols are a serious business. We were given a briefing from the lead ranger: "I will go ahead and scope the beach, stay at least 50 metres behind me. If I see something, I will give you the flash signal with my red light. Stop and wait for a second flash and approach slowly with the rangers. There is to be no use of phones or lights except your red head torch." Turtles are very sensitive to light and may choose not to approach the beach if they see any lights. Red light isn't visible to them and is therefore used to minimise disturbance.

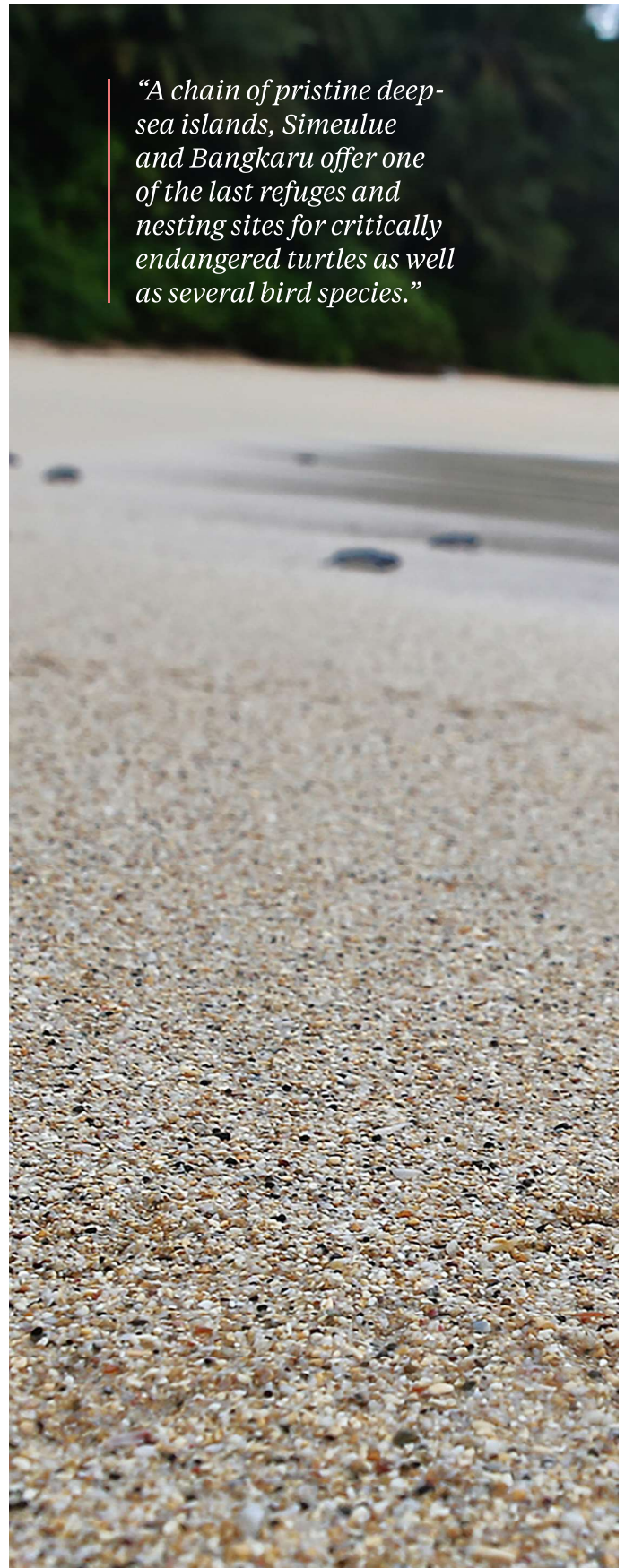
Huddling together we waited for the ranger to make his way up the beach. After being given the all clear, we followed. Stomping along the shore, electric blue specks in the sand danced and shimmered as our feet disturbed bioluminescent plankton. The flashing lightning above and the twinkling sand below was quite a spectacle.

All of a sudden, a red light bobbed up and down some way ahead. A mother turtle had been spotted. She had just excavated her hole and was beginning the process of laying. In the water turtles are graceful and seem to glide effortlessly. On land it is another story. The whole process is clearly an exhausting experience of heaving, hauling, digging and flapping, and can take up to three hours from exiting to re-entering the sea.

In this instance the species was a green turtle, the most commonly found species on Bangkaru. Around a metre in length and weighing between 110–190kg, green turtles are impressive creatures. But leatherbacks – the other species that nest on Bangkaru – are real prehistoric beasts. Leatherbacks are the only remaining species of their kind and have remained relatively unchanged since sea turtles evolved more than 110 million years ago. Around two metres long and up to 700kg in weight, they really do resemble living dinosaurs.

Leatherbacks nest on the beach for approximately 40 nights a year, between October and April. Green turtles nest every night of the year. A single night can result in five to 20 nests, sometimes more. An average of 200 turtles visit the beach a month.

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| PREVIOUS: An adult green turtle in the shallows of Bangkaru Island.


| THIS PAGE: Hatchlings make their way to the open ocean.





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*Bangkaru’s pristine beauty, as seen from above.*

An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The foreground is dominated by large, dark, porous volcanic rocks scattered across a white sandy beach. Several lush green palm trees are visible, some leaning over the rocks. The background shows a dense line of tropical vegetation, including more palm trees and other green plants. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

A chain of pristine deep-sea islands, Simeulue and Bangkaru offer one of the last refuges and nesting sites for critically endangered turtles as well as several bird species. The EcosystemImpact Foundation is working to keep these islands wild through a sustainable approach where business, people and nature are given the tools to thrive alongside each other, providing immediate solutions to urgent problems of biodiversity and habitat loss through ranger programmes, breeding programmes and habitat protection and restoration. This is all alongside long-term solutions focussing on sustainable business, sustainable financing streams and education.

To get to Bangkaru, one must travel from Medan on mainland Sumatra – already quite remote – to Simeulue Island via a small island-hopping plane. From Simeulue it is then an eight-hour boat ride. There are very few places left in the world as unaltered by humans as the Simeulue and Bangkaru Islands. Bangkaru's beaches are home to the largest nesting site for green sea turtles in Western Indonesia, along with being an important nesting site for leatherback turtles. However, just because Bangkaru and Simeulue are remote, does not mean that the wildlife there is safe. Before the foundation started supporting the Bangkaru Ranger Programme, poachers were taking as many as 1,500 eggs a night, threatening the existence of the local sea turtle populations.

“I have been with the programme for 13 years and before that, I was a fisher,” said Uzhar, who travels from Haloban to Bangkaru for his work. “I feel like my heart called me to get involved in protecting wildlife. However, at the start I felt like I didn't know anything about conservation activities. The more experience I had the deeper I fell in love with this work and the more I realised that our lives are interdependent with nature.

“On one occasion, 25 poachers were on the shore and two people chased us with machetes. We almost retreated but decided to stand our ground, also holding machetes. They saw that their machetes were smaller than ours and retreated. The next day when we returned to the beach, all the turtle eggs were gone. Not one was left on the beach. We had this experience every day for four years.”

EcosystemImpact became involved in the Bangkaru Ranger Programme, which was originally launched by sea turtle conservation NGO Yayasan Pulau Banyak, after Luke Swainson, one of EcosystemImpact's founders, took a trip to the island and witnessed its vibrancy, as well as the sheer number of turtles nesting on its beaches.

A team of six rangers now provide constant protection on Bangkaru, under the leadership and direction of Indonesia's wildlife protection agency, BKSDA. Since their involvement began in 2016, BKSDA, EcosystemImpact and partners have reduced poaching cases to zero. Ranger programmes work because of the ranger's presence and their ability to enforce the law.



| TOP: Bangkaru's rangers head off on patrol.  
| MIDDLE: A hatchling emerges from its egg.  
| BOTTOM: A green turtle atop a seabed of sand and seagrass.

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At first the rangers were met with hostility. They posed a threat to the food or income source for many locals. The turtles are hunted for their meat and shells, and the eggs are often poached to then be sold to those who eat them as a delicacy. Conservation complexities around issues such as poaching can be hard to untangle – communities need to be connected with, their needs understood. People need food and money. They do care about the environment but food and money are more critical. Once those needs are met, or at least recognised and acknowledged, conservation activities can flow more easily. The Bangkaru Ranger Programme has been set up to support the local communities and provide other sources of income and education, including employment as rangers and caretakers of the ranger camp.

“People hated us – the new rangers,” said Uzhar. “Every night we met poachers on the beach. And every night as soon as we left, the turtle eggs would be taken. We received a lot of hate when we went back to the community. But every time we went back home, we would report the poaching information back to BKSDA and the police. In the end, in 2016 BKSDA and the police arrested the poachers. This was not easy for BKSDA and the police, and we congratulate them for it. Since then, our work has been so much easier.”

The Pulau Banyak (Many Islands) region where Bangkaru is located, remains sparsely populated and undeveloped. Although Bangkaru is uninhabited, there are two island communities that live on adjacent islands. It is these populaces that EcosystemImpact and its partners have worked with to secure Bangkaru’s turtle populations. All rangers are members of these communities, and are now respected.

An element of the programme believed to have been integral to its success is the community member rangers project. Each 15 days a different person from the local community joins the Bangkaru Rangers on the island. They participate in ranger activities and learn from the team. They also earn a salary. It has proven an effective means of community engagement and environmental

education, with resounding community support.

As part of its environmental education initiatives, EcosystemImpact runs a Sekolah Alam (Nature School) with the local residents. Sekolah Alam sessions teach children basic English whilst concentrating on conservation themes, so as to increase awareness around environmental issues. The community has also asked for support alongside the conservation work, including on education, waste management and a soccer field. However, the programme has never had sufficient funding to fully cover the conservation work needed, and thus, has not yet been able to do much for broader community development issues.

It is always surprising that even in the middle of nowhere, huge amounts of plastic waste wash ashore. Each day the rangers collect sacks of rubbish from Bangkaru’s beaches. As well as being harmful to adult turtles if eaten, plastic waste can also trap turtle hatchlings on their way to the ocean. Currently, this plastic waste is shipped to the mainland and recycled where possible. To help solve this problem, EcosystemImpact is working on a plan to recycle the rubbish collected from Bangkaru into clothing.

EcosystemImpact, alongside a small collective of organisations and partners, seek to address the social, environmental and economic aspects of conservation at ground level on Simeulue and Bangkaru. The vision is to finance businesses that create jobs and green growth, as well as to promote local support for a more sustainable development path. Providing sustainable financial support for traditional conservation and community development initiatives is also key to protecting the future of these islands and their inhabitants. A healthy economy goes hand in hand with a healthy planet.

Bangkaru is wild. It is only after visiting such remote and wild places, that one appreciates how significant an impact humanity is having on this planet. Many places around the world have been so altered it would be hard to find something we would consider ‘natural’ within them. But human influence is everywhere, even beyond those urbanised areas. From poaching to plastic, and the burning of fossil fuels, humans are changing remote landscapes such as the Bangkaru and Simeulue Islands.

Each and every action we take – wherever we are on the planet – has an impact and we must be conscious of these impacts. But these impacts can, of course, be good, even great. Conservation can work for both biodiversity and for people.

“Sea turtles are our ancient inheritance,” said Uzhar. “They are protected by Indonesian and international law. Turtles balance out the health of our marine ecosystem through the consumption of algae, jellyfish and seagrass. We hope that community members who are capturing turtles for food or for souvenirs stop these activities and switch to other livelihoods so that animals from this ancient heritage will not become fables of our future.” 