

Turtle Talks
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Walking the beach in South West Florida where I live. I would see yellow marker stakes in the sand that notified beach goers that Loggerhead and Green turtles had nested on the site. When I was eleven, I met a woman who would change my destiny. Linda Soderquist took me under her wing and from that time on became my mentor and supporter. Ms. Soderquist is a teacher at Venice Elementary, she is also an artist. Linda holds the sea turtle monitoring permit on Little Gasparilla Island. She explained to me that some species of the nesting turtles are endangered. Each year volunteers walk the beach and keep statistics on the success or failure of every nest on the coast of Florida. It was that summer that I started walking the beach and became aware of the dismal future of these animals.

It was the summer of 2001 that I had a dream that I would create my own educational program and take it to kids and adults and tell them that they could help the fate of these ancient reptiles. Shortly after that I saw an article in the paper for a youth grant that was available for young people to apply for, if they had an idea for a special project. I applied for the grant and the youth board of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation in Venice, Florida, honored my request.

Things were starting to take shape; the next step was something that I wasn't sure could happen. Would teachers and librarians let me come in and speak to their young people? I soon realized that they were willing to hear my presentation. In every talk that I give, I mention to the group to whom I am speaking. How I came up with my program and developed it to the point it is at now. That if you're a kid and you come up with a great idea. That grown ups will really listen to you and help you to put it into action.

To create my program, I went to Mote Marine Lab, in Sarasota. It was there that Tony Tucker shared with me the slides that they had on sea turtles. With those I put a power point presentation together. Next on to meet the staff at Sarasota County Natural Resources, where I asked questions of the sea turtle specialists. Every environmentalist that I met with to gain knowledge and talk about my idea was supportive. Maran Hilgendorf at Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program and Wilma Katz at Coastal Wildlife Club Inc. always answered my questions and encouraged me to follow my dream. In the spring of 2002 I started going to schools, libraries, and special events to talk about marine turtles. My community turtle road show was under way. The first school that I visited was one for mentally and physically challenged students. They were encouraging, and the students gave me a lot of good ideas on what to change and add to the program. That was six years ago, and now Turtle Talks has been given in front of thousands of students and adults. I have demonstrated my program at 50 schools, 9 libraries and 8 nature events. Some I visit on an annual basis and at the schools I usually host multiple classes.

Today, teachers and librarians ask if Turtle Talks will come and visit their youngsters. The presentations include a young person being asked to put on a turtle costume that I hand-made so that the parts of the turtle anatomy can be explained. A bio-degradable display board is used to show the length of time that trash takes to break down floating in the water. Examples are given on how harmful trash is in the waterways to sea life. If a Leatherback only eats jellyfish then how do balloons and plastic bags look to a hungry critically endangered giant turtle?

The power point presentation is shown so that everyone knows the different species of turtles that inhabit the oceans. It also informs the audience of the hazards that they face in their journey. Following the presentation questions are asked and the team always tries to explain that man is the biggest predator that turtles face. The message is that we are the generation that will determine the fate of sea turtles. It is up to us as young people to support conservation efforts so that these dinosaurs can continue to swim the world. One observation that I have made since I began giving my talks is, that kids and grown-ups will hang on every word I say. They are a captivated audience having a young person as a teacher.

In 2004, it was time for Turtle Talks to have its own information booklet to hand out with the presentations. It took most of the school year for me to write and edit.

I collaborated with my illustrator Linda Soderquist on the design and style of the book.

Over the years that I had been giving turtle talks, I always said to her that I could write a more interesting children's activity book than the ones that I requested from different agencies. One time Linda said, "If you write it, I will draw it." That goal was accomplished and I am very proud to distribute it as a free take home information/activity book. The number of requests that I have from the public verifies to me that the program is making an impact in the awareness of the conservation effort.

The Turtle Talk Activity Book has now gone into its fifth printing. There are 100,000 booklets now in print and distributed free in the English version. Thousands of requests were made for the book before it was available. The book has been sent to many schools and environmental groups in states the surround the Gulf of Mexico. Last year I spoke to the Spanish teacher at my high school, in Englewood, Florida and asked if she thought

it possible to translate the book into Spanish. Senora Aziz recommended her, Spanish 5 class. The twelve students in the class completed the translation in the spring and 20,000 books have been printed. This summer a student in France translated the book and it was printed in French in January.

Many national sea turtle conservation groups have requested the book to use as their own hand out. The booklet and message have been taken and sent to 7 countries in the Caribbean. The book is now being shared with conservation groups along the coast of Africa.

Currently, I have just finished writing a book on the Gopher Tortoise. It inhabits the 5 south eastern states of the U.S. They are increasing losing their habitat to development and the species has just moved up from a species of concern to become listed as a threatened species. It will be a youth activity book that will inform young people of their plight.

The book has been printed and 20,000 copies are already being shared with Florida, Georgia, and Alabama students.

This year I am a senior in high school and also an intern at Mote Marine Lab in Sarasota. Working under biologist, Tony Tucker in the sea turtle research center. It is as if it has come full circle for me. This is where it all started for me six years ago. Some afternoons when I walk into the lab. I think back to that day when I was in the 6th grade and I came to talk about my idea for a conservation program. I was a little kid and they acted like they knew that someday I would walk back in their lab one of them. At least they made me believe it was possible.

