

# Heeding the Call

Local sea-turtle activist answered 100 million years with a 100-hour documentary

BY MARCIANNE MILLER



Filmmaker David Weintraub of Flat Rock captures on video a green turtle that just nested and is headed back to sea. August 2013 at Melbourne Beach, Florida.

the effects of pollution and climate change. On land, the unabated development of beach communities causes trouble. Bright lights at night can disorient both a nesting mama and her babies, whose instincts lead them to seek the coming dawn on the horizon, not a nighttime basketball court.

The sea turtles are ancient mariners, with their super-efficient aerodynamic shells and sturdy fins. A male lives its entire life in the ocean, sometimes traveling thousands of miles each year. The female, however, once she becomes sexually mature, makes regular visits to the world's beaches. She drags herself on her flippers across the sand and digs a

**While vacationing at Seabrook Island off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, in 2012, David Weintraub encountered a group of wild animals that transformed his life. It wasn't a pack of wolves or a pod of whales. It was a bale of baby sea turtles.**

Weintraub's wife, Liz, had been awakened by a commotion on the beach. When the couple went to investigate, they discovered an excited group of adults and children dressed in fluorescent T-shirts. They were members of the local sea-turtle patrol, and they were excavating a loggerhead nest. In awe, David and Liz watched as 95 hatchlings erupted from the nest and the humans conscientiously guided them into the waiting waves of the sea.

As a well-known local environmentalist, Weintraub had had lots of experience with the mysteries of nature, but he'd never seen anything like how enraptured the sea-patrol members became when interacting with the turtles. He wanted that magic for himself — and when he'd found it, he wanted to share it with others. In essence, he became a film-making "turtle hugger," determined to help people "connect to nature on an emotional level," to see animals as fellow travelers in the web of life.

Turtles meet life-threatening dangers everywhere. In the ocean there are predators, such as sharks, and humans who hunt them, or trap them accidentally in their fishing nets. (Turtles must rise to the surface to breathe.) Like all other sea creatures, the turtles suffer from

hole with her back fins to lay her clutch of soft-shelled eggs. She covers them with a flurry of sand, then makes the exhausting trek back into the ocean.

The sea turtle, with its remarkable resilience, became the muse Weintraub needed to face the never-ending challenges that making a film requires. After three years of work and 100 hours of footage, he finished *The Call of the Ancient Mariner: The Fascinating Story of Man's Encounter with Turtles, Changing Both of Their Lives Forever*. It's an exquisitely made 77-minute documentary that won first prize at this year's Charleston Film Festival. Now the film is beginning its most important step: showing at public screenings in order to encourage discussion of its themes.

At the beginning, Weintraub uses stunning animation to show how the sea turtle has always had a mystical relationship with humans. The Cherokee creation myth "Turtle Island" tells how the turtle dove back and forth to the bottom of the sea to bring earth up to the surface to create land. It's a creature that plays a primal role in hundreds of creation myths around the world, even in cultures that have no contact with the sea. (Some indigenous people consider sea turtles to be their direct ancestors.)

Streaming through the film as an emotional current is the music of three regional musicians: singer/guitarist Carol Duermit, guitarist Tom



## **The Call of the Ancient Mariner**

### **Asheville Premiere**

Thursday, June 11, 6:30pm at the North Carolina Arboretum (100 Frederick Law Olmsted Way) in Asheville. Film followed by a panel discussion with local naturalists. \$10.

### **Hendersonville Celebration of DVD Release**

Friday, June 12, 7pm at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville (409 E. Patterson St.). Film followed by panel discussion with local naturalists. Live music, refreshments. \$10.

For ticket info: [saveculture.org/call-of-the-ancient-mariner](http://saveculture.org/call-of-the-ancient-mariner)

Fisch, and Native American flutist Michele Skeele. "Music, to me, is the dimension that touches us like nothing else does," says Weintraub. "So the film is lucky to have such music gems."

The movie was shot in coastal areas in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, with contributions of footage from other filmmakers around the world. Fundraisers, scientists, turtle-conservation experts, historians, and hundreds of volunteers also played crucial roles. But Weintraub says his biggest supporter, the one who helped keep him going through the long months of production, was his son Jonah, now 12. "His enthusiasm for the project and his love of sea

creatures reaffirmed my love of the sea. He has learned everything he could about turtles, to the point that he was telling marine biologists some things about turtles they didn't know. He inspires me."

The film relates an old proverb: "Turtles only make progress when they stick their necks out."

"Maybe the new proverb should be: 'When we stick our necks out, we can save these iconic creatures for the ages ... and maybe ourselves, as well,'" says Weintraub.

**Marcianne Miller is a member of SEFCA (Southeast Film Critics Assn) and NCFCA (North Carolina Film Critics Assn.) Email her at [marci@aquamystique.com](mailto:marci@aquamystique.com).**

## **Sea Turtle Facts**

- They've been on Earth for more than 100 million years.
- Of the seven sea turtle species, six (all but the flatback) exist in the U.S., and all are endangered or threatened.
- They are unable to pull their heads or flippers into their shells.
- It can take decades for sea turtles to reach sexual maturity. Male sea turtles spend their entire lives at sea.
- Females return at night to the same beaches where they were born to lay their clutches of soft-shelled eggs, ranging from 50 to 350 eggs, depending on the species.
- After about 60 days, the baby sea turtles emerge. The gender of the hatchlings depends on the temperature of the sand. Lighter sands mean higher temperatures, resulting in more female hatchlings.
- Sea turtles nest in more than 80 countries.
- The Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge along Florida's eastern coast is the leading loggerhead and green-turtle nesting beach in the country, thanks to superb conservation practices started more than 30 years ago.

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