

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Lessons from loggerheads

These days, it's hard to get funding for pure wildlife research – that driven simply by curiosity to expand our knowledge of the natural world – because more and more of the limited money available goes into so-called applied research, aimed at finding practical solutions to specific problems.

Perhaps it's inevitable, given the scale and variety of threats facing the natural world. But it's plainly wrong. Pure research is fundamental to understanding how animals live, what makes them tick and what they need to survive. And it provides the building blocks for applied research. There are no guaranteed 'Eureka!' moments – but then again no one knows what might come out of it, given sufficient time.

Sea turtles provide a recent example. Two years ago, the first-ever global study of the impacts of fisheries bycatch on sea turtles was published. It's a brilliant example of applied research and reveals that, in the past two decades, literally millions of sea turtles have drowned in fishing nets or died after swallowing fishing hooks.

It was bad news, of course, but it gave conservationists the concrete evidence they needed to tackle the problem.

Now another turtle study has just been published – and this time it's pure research that has come to the fore. Based on data spanning several decades, it shows that female loggerhead turtles don't start to lay eggs until they are 45 years old.

This is fascinating in its own right, but it also raises the stakes in the fisheries problem. It's no longer a simple matter of how many turtles are dying – the crucial point is that many have never had a chance to breed.



First-time mum: 45 if she's a day..



A new study shows that female loggerhead turtles don't start to lay eggs until they are 45 years old."

If it is to be effective, conservation needs accurate and up-to-date information from both applied and pure research. This means that wildlife research for its own sake is by no means a luxury. It is fundamental.

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