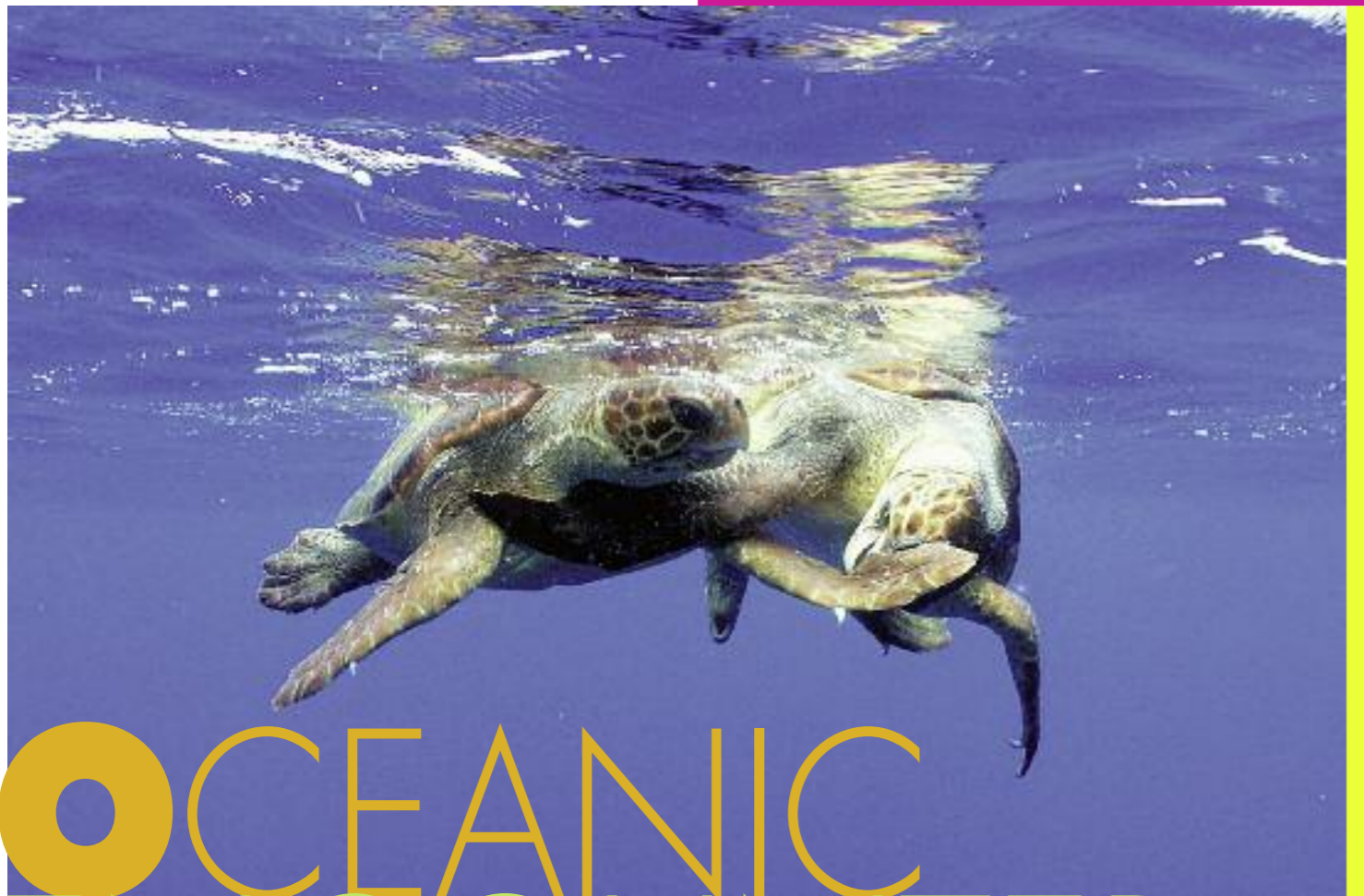


:TEXT AND PICTURES
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OCEANIC ENCOUNTER

> Boundless ocean everywhere, wave after slow, giant wave charging from the infinite beyond and rolling against our prow. Lifting us above a never-ending landscape of moving blue-green hills, bringing us to full sun, plunging us a scant moment after in a deep blue valley so smooth you could think it made by a Venetian glass-master with centuries of craft secrets at his fingertips.

away, almost lost beyond our wake, the isle, its mountains only piercing the horizon. On the surface, here and there, long quivering vibrations, schools of small baitfish briskly minding their own business, too slow and too wide spread to be under attack. Flying fish pop over the surface, rowing madly with their tails, wings fully extended, leaving the ocean against the scant wind and flying their chance fly. Short ones if they find in their way a mounting wall against which they briefly crash, disappearing into it. A long one if their good fortune brings them a clear course down a huge blue valley. Easy reading of ocean surface.

But over there, unknown spurts and sprays. White water sent to sky by some mysterious beings, under it thrashing, confused colours just glimpsed. Then a powerful beak, a round scaled head: sea turtles. But which ones? And what are they doing so actively?

Into the water, camera ready, always curious of every life so deeply



LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLES FOR THE SCIENCE

Loggerhead sea turtles, *Caretta caretta*, are found almost everywhere in the world's temperate and tropical oceans. They are the largest hard shell sea turtles, with an upper shell or 'carapace', and a lower shell or 'plastron'. They grow to a weight of at least 200 kilograms and to a length of almost two meters. There's a controversial subdivision proposed by some scientists between the Atlantic-Mediterranean sea turtles (*Caretta caretta caretta*) and the ones in the Pacific Ocean (*Caretta caretta gigas*), the first one is smaller than the latter.

Loggerhead sea turtles live in open ocean for the most part of their lives, but they're still dependent on land for reproduction. When the time comes, females approach their nesting grounds and, still in the open ocean, wait for the males. The courtship is somewhat rough, the male searching to take hold of the slippery body of the female. For this reason they've developed two big claws on their forelimbs, useful for inserting them just behind the female's carapace.

After the mating, at night, the female approaches a suitable nesting beach, usually the same in which she was born. Dragging herself out of the water she then proceeds to dig a nest in the sand where she'll lay around 100-130 eggs. The eggs incubation period greatly depends on the temperature of the eggs themselves, and can be between 40-80 days. The temperature also induces sex changes in the hatchlings. Higher temperatures produce more females, lower ones produce more males.

It's estimated the majority of Loggerhead sea turtles live for 50-60 years, though they have been known to live for over 150 years. Their feeding habit is primarily carnivorous, but they've been observed also munching on different kinds of algae. They eat consequently almost anything, making them a generalist feeder. Much is still to be learned about their migratory abilities. The species is internationally protected.

> **LINK:** en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loggerhead_Sea_Turtle

drenched in the ocean. An automatic unconscious glance under my navel: endless blue of open water, wandering towers of light dancing with the sun. Nothing else.

Slowly I swim toward the commotion. Two massive Atlantic loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*), each around one hundred kilos, the male easily identifiable by his long tail and strong claws on his forelimbs. They are in love, courting. He's a passionate lover, fiercely nipping at her left forelimb, his right one caught under her chin.

He's in a kind of breath-holding trance, eyes closed, almost not moving. She has only her right paw free and she's rowing strongly to keep her head above the surface to breathe. The group is slowly revolving, awkwardly far away from the usual elegance these bulky reptiles show in the water.

I come close to them, nosy voyeur, trying not to disturb the loving couple. They're showing alternatively green expanses of algae on the carapaces and yellow-orange plastrons, round eyes impassive. I shoot picture after picture, feeling like an underwater paparazzo sticking a camera under some unenthusiastic celebrity nose.

Now rotating they change position, they embrace each other, their forelimbs like arms, him hugging fiercely the body of the female. Confused moments, sonorous breathing echoing underwater, powerful paws spraying water all around and over me. Locked in each other's grip, they still rotate, lost in their infinite, unstable water bed.

It's enough. I expire slowly, totally, slipping underwater without moving, not wanting to disturb them anymore.

I float down and down, my empty lungs increasingly compressed, tiptoeing away in a sort of hushed, breathless slow-motion swim. I roll once to glimpse above and behind me. They still revolve, black shapes now against the brilliance of the surface, a halo of receding white froth all around them. I leave them alone. To finish their act, the unconscious hope of refurbishing the ocean by countless new, bright sea turtles.

Would they call with my name the first of their future hundreds of sons?