



# *The Jicotea*

## Cultural identity of the Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban sliders

Rob Stephenson

Sliders in a hotel pond, Dominican Republic.

Caribbean sliders are hardy and tough little turtles that are full of character. They're often overlooked because of their drab appearances but if given the chance, they make up for it with their spicy attitudes and behavior. Their care in captivity is similar to most slider species with a bit more emphasis on water temperatures. In this article, I chose to concentrate on the history, human interaction, and cultural identity of these amazing chelonians rather than their husbandry.

I've been in love with turtles, as most of you reading are, from the minute I laid eyes on them. Growing up in New York, a pair of those cute little Red-eared slider babies in bowls, for sale on the sidewalk in Chinatown, became my first pets. Like most turtle fans, I went through the various steps however, and my interest quickly developed for

more exotic species. In fact, those childhood sliders were really the last time I'd had any interest in any of the slider species. That all changed when I visited my good friend Dennis Uhrig's facility. Watching him passionately describe each slider species and seeing the beautiful array of colors and patterns they came in, I started to warm to the whole genus. Now, having a Puerto Rican mother, I naturally started researching the Puerto Rican slider first. I even asked my mother what she knew about the turtles from PR ( I vaguely remembered old stories about them) to which she happily replied, "The *Jicotea*? I've seen a lot of them. They're important to our culture." She then proceeded to tell me tales of the turtle from her youth and from there, I dug in.

Puerto Rican (*Trachemys stejnegeri stejnegeri*), Cuban (*Trachemys decussata*), and Dominican

(*Trachemys stejnegeri vicina*) sliders are all very similar in appearance and behavior. In the Latin based islands they are known as “Jicotea” (Hee-co-tey-a). Their cousins in the rest of the Antilles are known locally as “Hickatees”. Both terms hail from the Taino Indian word “hikotea”, meaning “land turtle”, which they also applied to sea turtles as well. Apparently, the Tainos didn’t understand how aquatic these turtles actually are. LOL. What they did understand, however, was how sacred these beautiful creatures were. In fact, these turtles were thought to be the mother of humanity. The legend dictates that a *Jicotea* transformed into a woman who was the mother of man. The turtles, as a result, were and still are, held sacred and no one is to harm them. It was absolutely out of the question to eat them, which is quite different from many of their Central and South American cousins. They are revered throughout the islands and their symbolism has spanned the ages as they can be seen carved into ancient petroglyphs, tattooed on many skins, and worn as good luck. Today they are still protected in the islands only now by both law and legend.



Puerto Rican slider photo from the 1950s.



Reproduction of an ancient Taino petroglyph pendant.

In Puerto Rico, up until the mid-twentieth century, it was also a sign of good luck to give a young slider to someone as a gift. My great uncle gave my great aunt two Puerto Rican sliders on their wedding day in the 1950s. Both of them are long gone now but when I visited their daughter (now in her 70s) in PR last summer, to my surprise in the wash basin of her laundry room, sat a very large and old Puerto Rican slider looking as content as could be. I could not believe that this animal had survived sixty something years in buckets and a basin on a diet of bread, lettuce, and fish bits, yet there she was. Their daughter told me the other one had only recently passed away and that they had buried her in the yard for good luck and because the turtles were like family.

When I returned home, I happened to lean back in my office chair and gaze at a *Jicotea* carving my great uncle made and gave to me as a little boy. I never understood what he meant when he leaned over and in Spanish said, “Let her watch over you, as she has over the family.” After learning what I have, I’m fairly certain I now understand my dear old uncle’s sentiment.



Primitive *Jicotea* carving circa 1960s.

As I started researching them more, I learned there were all sorts of stories and misconceptions out there about these turtles. On a tour of ancient Taino ceremonial grounds, there was a small pond where

allegedly they would keep *Jicoteas* to bring luck to the community. There were even ceremonies where the village members would ask for the turtles' blessings for special needs. The guide told the group they were very fast on both land and water and that they were a type of snapping turtle as he held one up and it tried to bite him (I quickly and quietly dispelled that myth amongst the group). He then proceeded to tell the story I previously mentioned about the turtle who transformed into the mother of man,

but he also told of another belief. According to him, another popular Taino belief was that in ancient times there were great storms and great flooding (I would assume they were speaking of terrible hurricanes



Puerto Rican slider in a pond in Ponce', Puerto Rico.



Young slider in a pond in the Dominican Republic.

that are known to attack the island) and it was the mighty *Jicoteas* who rose from the water, exposing their shells so that man could reside on them. In other words, once again, the turtle was looked at as a savior to humanity and held sacred.

When I traveled to the Dominican Republic, there were sliders in almost every pond, every hotel fountain, and it seemed every body of freshwater that I saw. In fact, at the Renaissance in Santo Domingo, I asked why they had the turtles in the hotel pond outside and the guest services agent told me they were good luck here too. As I traveled around the country I was told of yet another legend. In this fable, the patterns on a turtle's shell hold the key to the ancient Taino lunar calendars. It is believed the marginal scutes correlate to the

daily calendar in a month and the inner scutes dictate the monthly cycle in a calendar year.

In conclusion, I've always been intrigued by myths and legends, but not necessarily a believer in all that I hear. I do find it interesting however that in all the stories and lore, the *Jicotea* is always identified as a female. After catching and studying many in the wild and keeping and growing up many captive-hatched babies here in the US, as well as cross referencing with Dennis and the few other breeders in the country working with these sliders, the majority of the ones I caught and the majority of the ones hatched in captivity are females and the few males tend to be the weaker sex. It begs the question, "Is there something to all these stories after all?" I guess we shall see. . .