

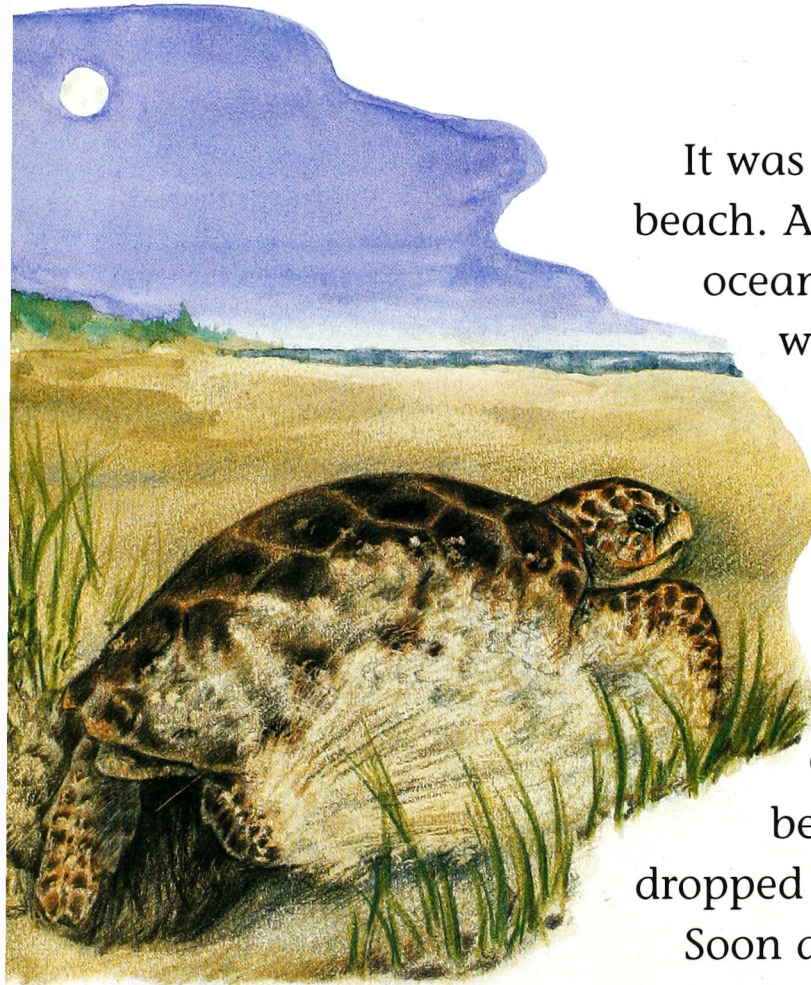
A Sea Turtle's Journey

by Laurence Pringle
illustrated by Diane Blasius

It was a summer night on a Florida beach. A big, dark shape rose out of the ocean and moved onto the shore. It was Caretta, a loggerhead turtle.

Caretta crawled away from the water. When she found dry sand, she began to dig a hole with her rear flippers. She dug down, down as far as she could reach. It was hard work. Caretta took a rest and then began to lay eggs. The eggs dropped into the hole Caretta had dug.

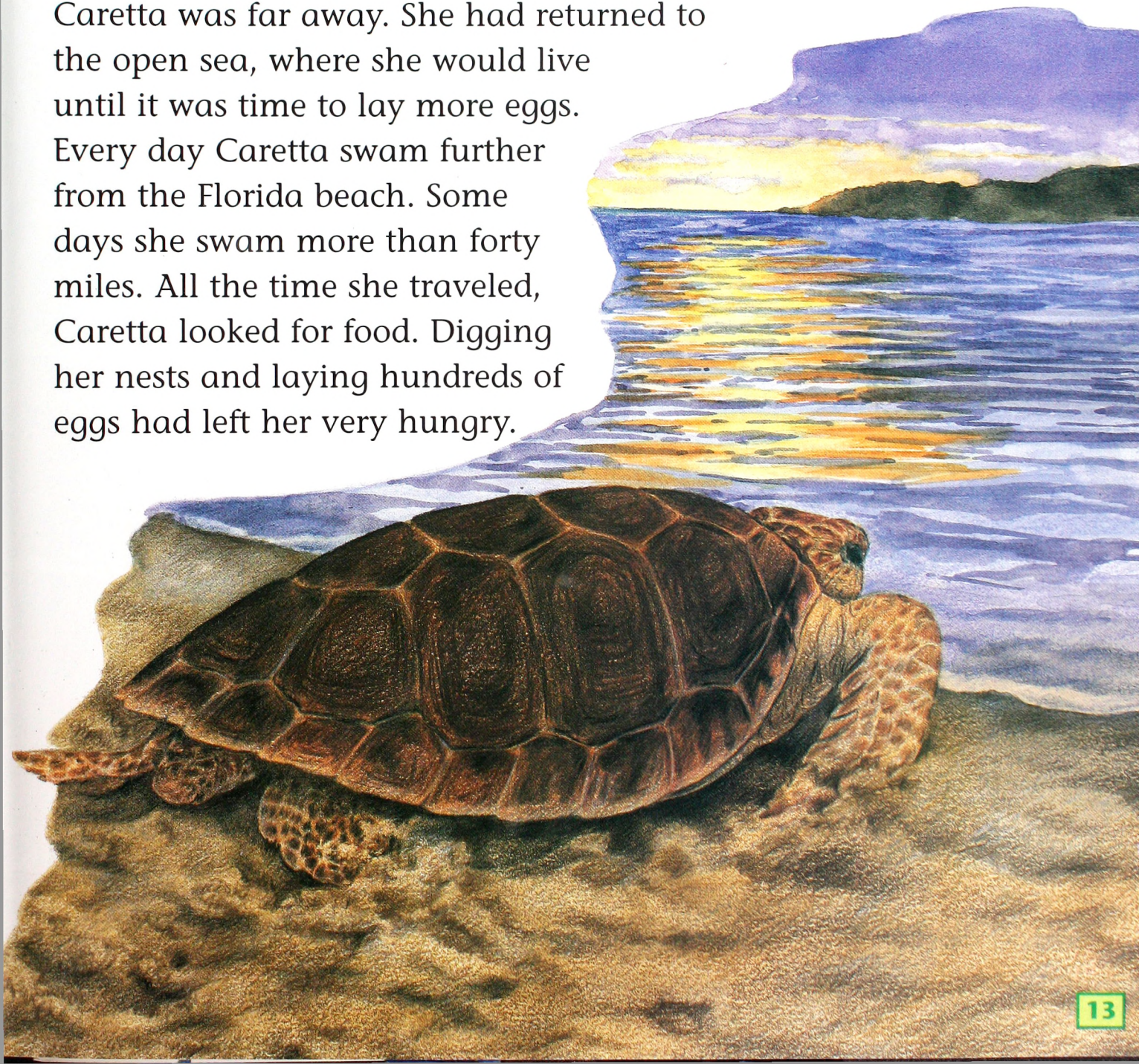
Soon a hundred white eggs lay in the hole. Caretta swept her big flippers across the top of her nest, covering the eggs with sand to hide and protect them. Then she crawled back down to the ocean's edge. A wave swept over her reddish-brown shell, and with powerful strokes of her front flippers, Caretta swam away from the beach and out into the ocean. Her job as a mother was finished.



Caretta had stayed near the Florida beach for several weeks. Six times she had come ashore to dig a nest and lay eggs. In about two months, hundreds of baby turtles would hatch from Caretta's eggs—ready to crawl toward the ocean, to swim, and to begin their own lives in the water.



But by the time her baby turtles hatched, Caretta was far away. She had returned to the open sea, where she would live until it was time to lay more eggs. Every day Caretta swam further from the Florida beach. Some days she swam more than forty miles. All the time she traveled, Caretta looked for food. Digging her nests and laying hundreds of eggs had left her very hungry.

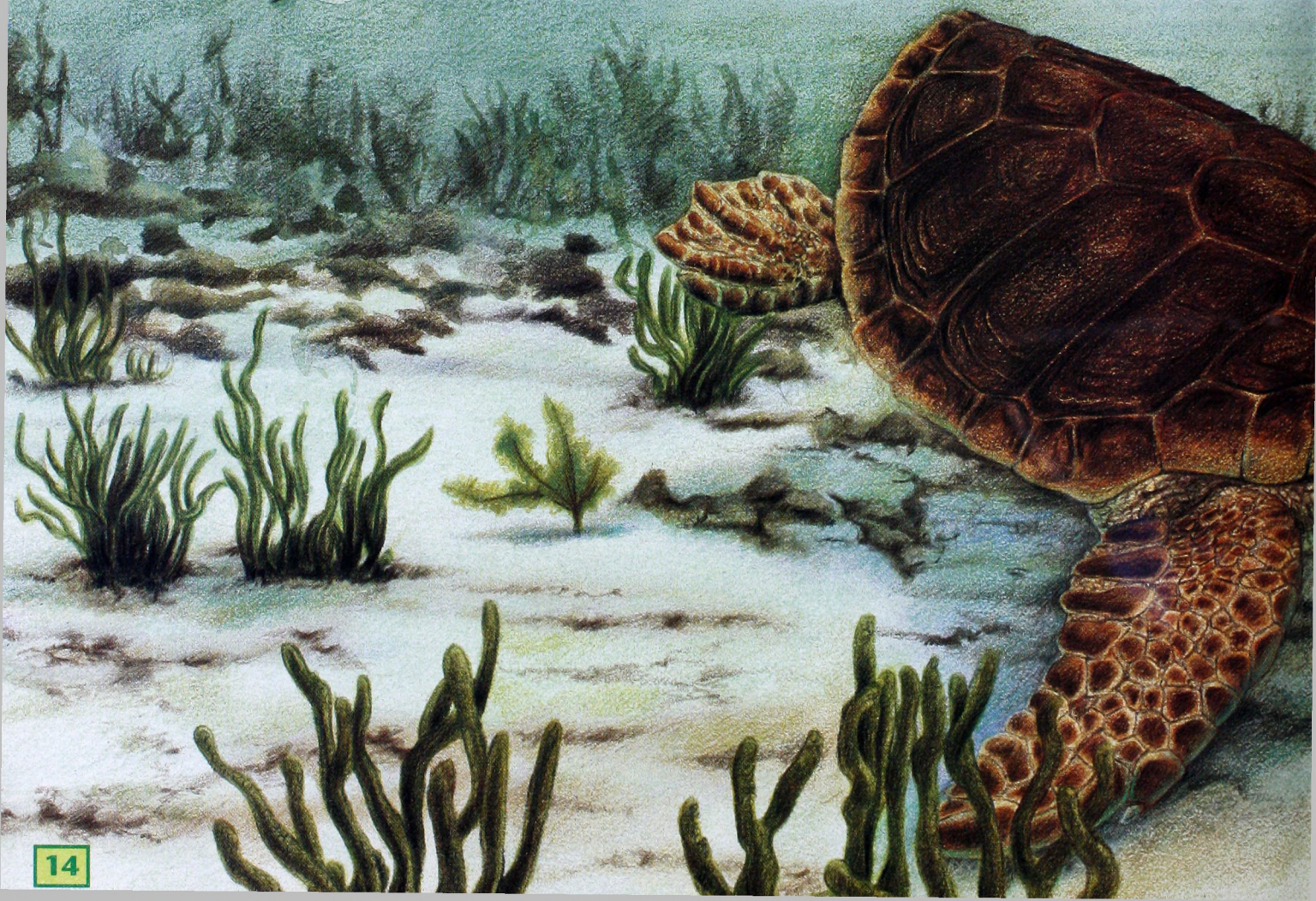




Caretta dove deep. As her front flippers moved back and forth, back and forth, Caretta looked like a huge but graceful underwater bird. She caught shrimp, crabs, and small fish in her mouth. Sometimes she ate jellyfish.

After many minutes underwater, Caretta rose to the surface and took a quick breath. Then she dove again. She often fed at night, when jellyfish, shrimp, and other prey were closer to the surface than in the daytime.

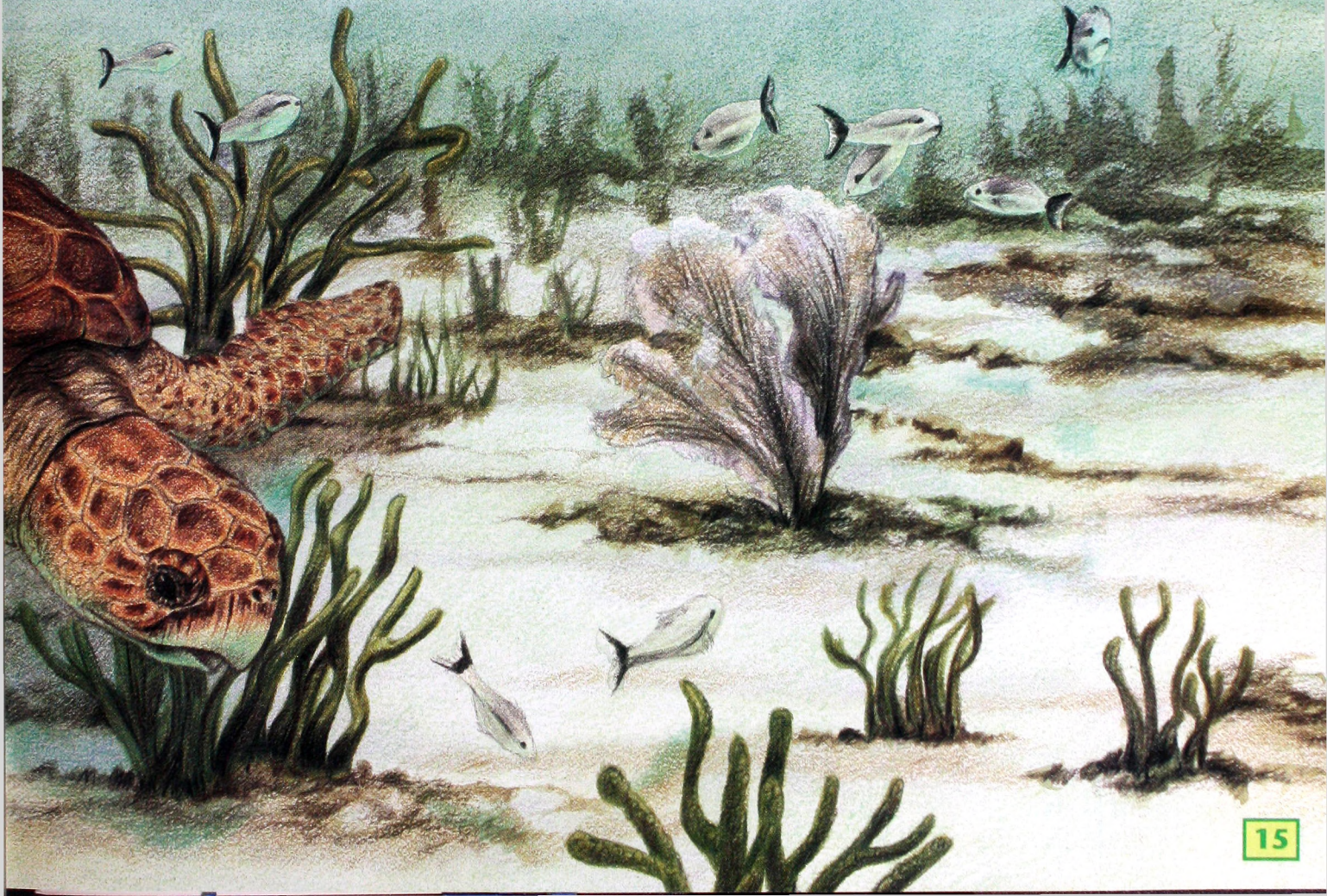
Month after month passed. Caretta traveled to warm tropical waters where



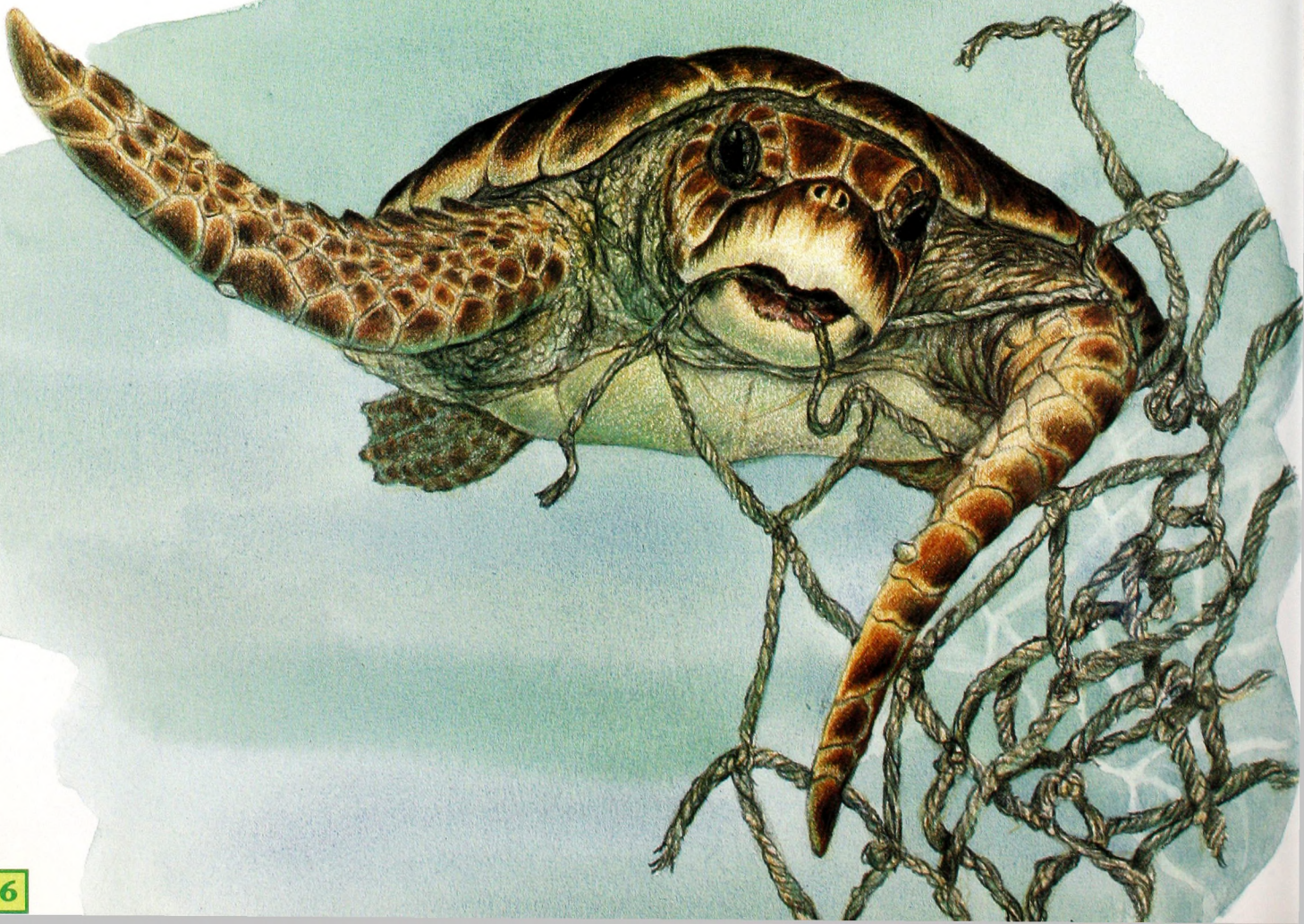
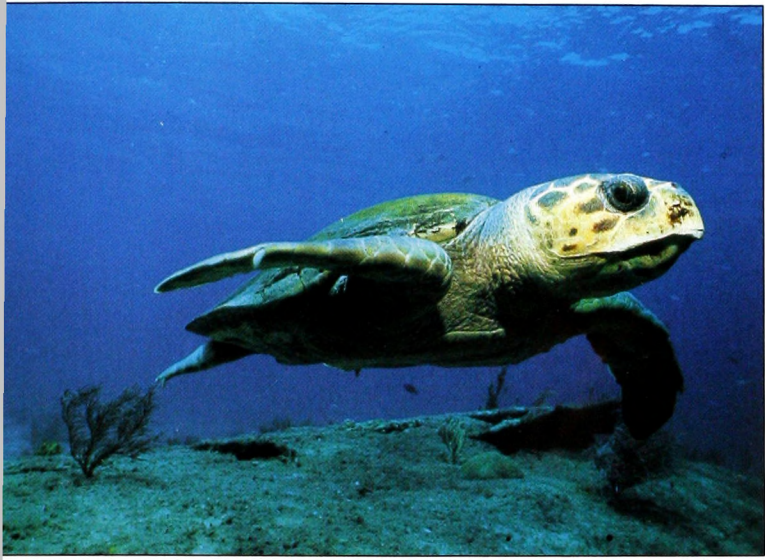
she could find plenty to eat. Her strong front flippers pulled her body through the water. She steered with her rear flippers and her tail. Somehow Caretta could always find her way.

Then, almost two years after Caretta had left the Florida beach, she turned and began her long journey back. It would soon be time for her to lay eggs again, and she had more than a thousand miles to travel. As she swam toward Florida, Caretta kept eating. She needed food for energy and for the eggs that would develop within her body.

Exactly how sea turtles navigate is still a mystery. They have a fine sense of smell, and being able to recognize different odors in the water may help them find their way. But sea turtles also have other senses that help them tell directions even better. For example, scientists think that sea turtles can feel the Earth's magnetic forces and tell direction from them.



One day Caretta swam into a fishing net that was drifting in the ocean. One of her flippers caught in the net. An ocean current carried the net and Caretta away from the route she had been traveling. Caretta struggled. She bit at the net with her strong jaws and finally broke free. Once again Caretta knew which way to go. She turned and swam toward Florida.





After many weeks Caretta reached the Florida coast. She swam close to the beach where she had laid her first eggs and where she had once hatched from an egg herself. Other loggerhead turtles were also returning to these waters. Caretta mated with a male loggerhead, and the eggs in her body developed further.

Soon Caretta would crawl out of the water, dig a hole in the sand, and begin again to lay eggs. After two years in the huge Atlantic Ocean, Caretta had completed her amazing sea-turtle journey.

