

# Sea turtles can tolerate casual contact



## KOKUA LINE

*June Watanabe*

**Question:** Since returning to the islands two years ago, I have been dismayed to find how often the turtles resting on the beaches are bothered by human contact. I have visited beaches on the North Shore and on the Big Island, and the situation is the same. The turtles are allowed little privacy and peace. They are constantly being closely surrounded to be photographed and touched. Even if there are signs to leave the turtles alone, they are ignored. Is there any beach patrol to keep an eye on these creatures? It seems as if this situation is tolerated to please the tourists. However, it is at the expense of the world's remaining turtles.

**Answer:** It obviously will surprise you to learn that, at least as far as Hawaiian green sea turtles are concerned, casual human contact, in most instances, is not considered bad.

This assessment comes from marine researcher George Balazs, a well-respected authority on the Hawaiian "honu."

Under state and federal acts, all sea turtles are protected from harm and harassment. In some areas, such as Florida, sea turtles are listed as "endangered," or facing extinction; in Hawaii, the green turtles — the species most people see — are categorized as "threatened," a step below the endangered stage.

He's studied and tracked Hawaiian turtles for more than 30 years, during which time they have gone from near extinction to being "very numerous throughout the Hawaiian Islands. There is hardly a place where turtles can't be seen," he said.

Balazs said he has no doubt that you are sincere in your concern for the well-being of the turtles. But, in his estimation — and emphasizing that he was speaking personally as a professional researcher and not officially on behalf of any agency — the Hawaiian sea turtles have become accustomed to living among humans.

"The turtles are in no way bothered by casual human contact," he said.

Having spent a good part of his life in the field studying and observing them, Balazs said he can "comfortably estimate that 99 percent" of some people's perception of harm or harassment of the turtles have "no basis in scientific fact."

But what constitutes harm or harassment? State officials we contacted agree that harm or harassment usually would involve something egregious, more than people taking photos or even getting close to the turtles.

Still, enforcement officials are hesitant to have people invade a turtle's space.

"We encourage people to appreciate the wildlife and observe them from a distance," said Francis Oishi, acting administrator of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources Aquatics Division. "That's the best way to enjoy those animals."

But first, if you witness someone killing, harming or harassing sea turtles, you are advised to call any of the following law enforcement agencies:

>> State Division of Conservation & Resources Enforcement, 587-0077.

>> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 861-8525.

>> The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's fisheries law enforcement office, 541-2727 or 853-1964.

For illegal tour bus or vehicle parking, or other traffic violations that may be related to turtle-watching on the North Shore or elsewhere on Oahu, you are advised to call police at 911 and say it is a nonemergency.

If you find a sick, injured, or dead turtle, call 983-5730 to find out what to do regarding veterinary treatment or removal for scientific study.

This information was provided by Balazs, leader of the National Marine Fisheries Services Marine Turtle Research Project in Hawaii.

He said the turtles knowingly come to beaches and coastal waters already occupied by people — sometimes a great many people — and seem "very willing" to share space with them.

Over the three decades that he's observed them, the turtles' behaviors have changed from "outright mortal fear of humans hunting and killing them, to one of acceptance, curiosity (and) seeming 'friendship.'"

In turn, in his professional opinion, "the vast majority of people" demonstrate good manners that do not constitute harm or harassment. That's even if they may get close to them and take numerous photographs, he said.

Balazs does acknowledge that, sometimes, some people do exhibit "bad manners." But even then, he said their actions still do not necessarily constitute harm or harassment to the turtles.

Gary Moniz, administrator of the state Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement, agrees that most people could not be accused of harming or harassing the turtles.

Balazs "clearly outlines the basic threshold, which is that the everyday basic, simple small things really don't affect the turtles," Moniz said. "The issue of what actually constitutes harassment comes down to something real overt: trapping them with a net, spearing them or tying them up. We're talking about more than just a bump or a touch or a pat on the head, etc."

Moniz said prosecution historically has been handled on a case-by-case basis and based on much consultation with biolo-

gists as to "what these animals tolerate and what they don't tolerate."

It's rare that law enforcement officials run across people who physically do harm the turtles — "netting them, tying them, throwing them in a boat, shooting them, spearing, beating with a stick," he said.

"Netting probably happens more than any other type of behavior," Moniz said. But "most people know to release them from the net, and if they do that, that's fine."

Like Balazs, Moniz said he does not believe that most people's encounters with the turtles are malicious.

But he said he's hesitant to say that because "I don't want to give the impression that you can play with turtles. It's best to leave them alone, not to feed them, etc."

But he also doesn't want to give the message that "if you bump a turtle that you're going to go to jail."

Oishi's advice is "to appreciate them, but also to respect them."

We were not successful in reaching the pertinent federal law enforcement officials for comment. But, in Balazs's eyes, he believes "people's hearts are touched by the magnificence of these ocean creatures viewed up close and personal in the wild."

"There is no doubt about this whatsoever in my mind, and especially when youngsters are involved. The positive effects favorable to conservation are lasting, perhaps for a lifetime."

*Got a question or complaint? Call 529-4773, fax 529-4750 or write to "Kokua Line," Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 7 Waterfront Plaza, Suite 210, Honolulu 96813. As many as possible will be answered. Send e-mail to [kokualine@starbulletin.com](mailto:kokualine@starbulletin.com)*