

A SEA OF Turtles

by Molly Hagemann
& Nicholas Griffith

George Balazs, zoologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Turtle Research Program, knows a thing or two about sea turtles. For over three decades, he's dedicated his life to studying those found in and around the Hawaiian Islands. Over that span of time, he's seen considerable fluctuations in population size, habitat, range, and behavior. He's been a steady champion for these majestic animals through the good times and the bad. Since the congressional passing of

Invaluable research material, their presence will serve scientists for decades to come in the areas of evolutionary biology and ecology.

Although Hawai'i is home to some five species of sea turtles, the Hawaiian green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is perhaps the most well known. Frequently seen just offshore, the *honu* has become an indelible symbol of Hawai'i. Through conservation initiatives such as Sea Life Park's turtle breeding colony, Balazs continues to work towards restoring healthy, sustainable populations of sea turtles from Hawai'i Island to Midway. Being a driving force for sea turtle conservation has also put him in the position of accepting the remains of those that have perished. A somber reminder of the many threats facing sea turtles worldwide, Balazs has used these to collect vital data for informed wildlife management.

In addition to providing over one hundred representative specimens for the olive ridley, loggerhead, hawksbill, leatherback, and Hawaiian green sea turtles, Balazs has contributed two freezers. The Vertebrate Zoology staff has been hard at work creating custom made, archival containers to house the various shapes and sizes of Balazs' specimens. Now that these are safely cataloged, we are happy to announce their availability to researchers worldwide!



ABOVE | Skull of a Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), a critically endangered species found in tropical coral reefs, including those around Hawai'i. Skeletal specimens such as this allow researchers to examine changes in turtle populations and track those patterns in relation to natural or human-induced changes in the environment. Understanding how and why turtle populations change help to create effective conservation plans.

the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, he has been a constant source of public engagement and activism. Having accumulated a fair number of biological samples along the way, Balazs has graced Bishop Museum with the lion's share of his specimens.

He has donated over one hundred new specimens to the vertebrate zoology collection. Freshly assembled archival boxes now teem with the smooth shells and skeletons of sea turtles. The bones of flippers jut out among the skulls of loggerheads, the sharp beaks of hawksbills threatening to bite at prying fingers.



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BELOW | Honu, turtle, sleeping on a North Shore beach. Photo: James Caycedo

