

Status of Marine Turtle Research and Conservation
in the Hawaiian Islands

By

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Sea turtles of the Hawaiian Islands include breeding populations of the green turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, and the hawksbill, *Eretmochelys imbricata*. Leatherbacks, *Dermochelys coriacea*, and olive ridleys, *Lepidochelys olivacea*, also occur in surrounding waters, but nest at unknown locations elsewhere in the Pacific. Hawaiian sea turtles have a history of underprotection, overexploitation and deterioration of their essential habitats. However, the conservation outlook has improved considerable since 1978 when full legal protection to sea turtles was provided under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. There is presently a high level of interest among government and private sectors in Hawaii to restore sea turtles to former levels of abundance. A government-sponsored Recovery Team of specialists has prepared an official Recovery Plan designed to conserve and restore Hawaiian sea turtles. The recommendations of the plan must now be implemented to achieve results.

Green turtles throughout the Hawaiian Islands migrate to nest at the remote site of French Frigate Shoals. At the breeding grounds both the female and male turtles bask ashore and share the beaches with the Hawaiian monk seal. Longterm tagging studies have shown that there are only about 750 adult female green turtles in the population.

Hawaiian green turtles grow at a slow rate. An average of 25 years is needed to reach sexual maturity. Recovery of the population will therefore require many years of protection. The hawksbill is a critically endangered species in the Hawaiian Islands and is in immediate danger of becoming extinct. There are only 10-15 turtles known to nest each year. Important factors germane to the recovery of Hawaiian sea turtle include law enforcement, habitat protection, public education, incidental capture in fishing gear, an epidemic of fibropapilloma (tumor) disease, and tiger shark predation.

In cooperation with the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu has provided tags and other technical assistance in sea turtle research to qualified persons throughout the Pacific islands.