



Hawai'i WESTWAYS

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July/August 2006

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WATERWORLD: Thanks to conservation efforts, Hawaiian green sea turtles are swimming in greater numbers in Island seas.



Return of the Honu

**Hawaiian green sea turtles
stage a comeback**

By Sophia V. Schweitzer

Photographs by Kirk Lee Aeder

In a small, secluded inlet called Nānuku, blending in with coral sand and lava rocks, a Hawaiian green sea turtle opens its right eyelid, lifts its flipper, looks at me, decides all is cool, then continues to bask in the morning sun. This resting and sunning on shore is typical for turtles in Hawai'i, says Daniel "Kaniela" Akaka Jr., cultural specialist at Hawai'i Island's Mauna Lani Resort. "This is our kupuna kahiko, an ancient ancestor, the honu," he says. He points at the ocean. "Look, another one is swimming in."

Akaka has brought me to this cove to talk about the Hawaiian green sea turtle, a species that outlived the dinosaurs, yet was threatened by extinction in recent years. "In Hawaiian culture, honu was a food source," he explains, "but it was also an 'aumakua, a family guardian. Honu was seen as a guide with wisdom. Honu was a navigator, bonded to the Hawaiians. The ancient Hawaiian navigators envisioned the map of the world on honu's carapace to find the way back home."





HONU 'OHANA: At Mauna Lani Resort, (clockwise, from left) cultural specialist Daniel "Kaniela" Akaka Jr. shares insights about honu's place in Hawaiian tradition, and Lōkahi manager Pi'i Laeha greets volunteer Bianca Shropshire and demonstrates how to clean algae off a sea turtle's shell.

The traditional regard for honu changed in the late 1960s, when Hawai'i blossomed as a tourist destination and turtles became a favorite and lucrative restaurant dish. Turtle meat consumption jumped from 380 pounds in 1963 to more than 25,500 pounds in 1972. Honu—called "green turtle" because of the color of its body fat—became scarce. "Honu is our link to nature; it symbolizes the past that is in the present," Akaka says. "In Hawaiian wisdom, everything is interdependent. If honu goes, will we go as well?"

The basking turtle lifts its flippers and, without any hurry, heads back for the waves.

The truth is that sighting honu, although always awe-inspiring, is not all that uncommon these days. During the last few decades, this remarkable creature has once again shown its survival skills. Supported by a dedicated scientist who has rallied the support of educators, coworkers, and volunteers, honu currently swim in promising numbers.

Sticking His Neck Out

The story starts with biologist George Balazs, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program of the National Marine

Fisheries Service at the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center in Honolulu. Balazs was just 26 years old when he happened to see fishermen in Lahaina handling dozens of struggling turtles to be sold to the town's eateries, back in 1969. *Could turtles possibly breed fast enough to sustain such demand?* he asked himself. The turtles fascinated the young scientist, who had recently graduated from the University of Hawai'i with a master's degree in animal science. No one knew how these turtles mated, what they ate, how they spent their time, or how and when they died. He realized that answers needed to be found before it was too late.

In 1973, Balazs spent his first lonesome season on East Island in the French Frigate Shoals, about 500 miles from the main Hawaiian Islands, where female turtles migrate to nest and lay eggs. Balazs had been told that his worries were unfounded, that thousands of female turtles crawled onto the shores of the French Frigates each year to lay their eggs. He counted 67. Not enough, he reasoned, to maintain the population across the entire 1,500-mile-long Hawaiian archipelago.

Since then, Balazs has dedicated his energies to the honu's rescue and future survival. Thanks to his efforts, the U.S.

government placed the Hawaiian green sea turtle on the endangered/threatened species list in 1978. Killing and harassment of honu became a federal crime.

Slowly, the honu came back. "Last season, we saw more than 500 nesting females on East Island," Balazs says. "The honu are well on their way to recovery. It's hard to give exact population numbers, but we are now in our 34th year of monitoring, and their future looks very good. Walk along any of our shores, and you'll see turtles pop to the surface—even in Waikiki."

Balazs's key to the turtle's resurgence has been committed partnerships. He spread the word among schools, the media, and tourism authorities. He helped to create the "Show Turtles Aloha" campaign to educate the public on how to enjoy turtle-watching while respecting honu by leaving them to bask alone in the warm sand. Balazs also worked closely with government institutions, marine wildlife organizations, veterinary specialists, and volunteers to create a network in which turtles could get the care they needed. And he encouraged communication among all these entities. Today, a stranded turtle can be reported to the state's Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement via various telephone numbers, and someone will come to the rescue.

Ancient Ambassadors

One such partnership emerged in 1989, between Mauna Lani Resort and O'ahu's Sea Life Park Hawai'i by Dolphin Discovery. Today, the marine park sends turtles hatched on its artificial beach to the resort for care. They're at the perfect age (about nine months) and size (six to eight inches long) to make human hearts feel protective. These captive-raised turtles serve as their own ambassadors in an educational loan program. Balazs participates as a research collaborator.

This rainy morning, I've returned to Mauna Lani to see the turtles. Now about 15 to 18 months old, they've been gathered inside for their quarterly veterinary exam. They seem resigned to the weigh-in, but they're not too pleased about someone looking into their mouths. I watch, mesmerized by the ivory color on the underside of their shells, the vulnerability of the flesh, the porcelain patterns and tones of purple on the skin, the reddish eyebrows, and their strong flippers. Resort guests wander by, then stop in wonder, and soon pose questions to veterinarian Robert A. Morris. *How long can they be without water?* "Days, weeks," he says, reassuring us. *How much do they weigh?* "About 10 to 13 pounds."

Some of the turtles that Morris treats have been stranded or wounded by boats; others swallowed fishhooks or were tangled in debris. And some suffer from fibropapilloma, a tumor-forming, and sometimes fatal, disease. Morris provides medical expertise within Balazs's network.

Another partnership involves outreach. About once a month, Mauna Lani Lōkahi manager Pi'i Laeha invites resort guests

Turtles Galore

I pulled the car onto the shoulder of State Highway 83, about three miles north of Hale'iwa, on O'ahu's North Shore. "If you see turtles on the beach, signal me and I'll park," I said to my girlfriend, Julie. A minute later, she emerged from behind the hedges, yelling excitedly, "Park the car! Park the car! They're all over the beach!"

Well, maybe not *all over*, but five large Hawaiian green sea turtles were lying placidly on the sand, looking as though they'd just finished a marathon swim and needed some rest. A couple of dozen people surrounded them, waiting for an eye to open or a flipper to flop. Turtles hang out here most days; in fact, they've become so popular, they need a little looking after. So for the past year, a staff member or volunteer from the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center has come to the beach to educate people and to make sure that the turtles aren't disturbed.

"They're quite popular because turtles are very revered in Hawaii," says Wende Goo of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service. "We put a red rope around the area where they rest, with an open route to the water, and we let people know they should stay outside the rope. We want to strike a balance between people being able to enjoy the turtles while allowing the turtles the space they need." Turtle/Laniākea Beach is located at the south end of Pōhaku Loa Way loop road.

—John Lehrer

to participate in the process of cleaning algae off the captive turtles. "Out in the wild, fish clean turtle shells," he explains. "But in the ponds, the fish may need help, so we assist them."

Because of the rain, Laeha has canceled this morning's cleaning session; but Cameron Atsumi, a seventh-grader doing research for his environmental class at West Hawai'i Explorations Academy, isn't giving up. With a sponge and a bucket of water in hand, he tries to clean a turtle on the grass. The turtle, slippery and wet, wriggles and resists. "This is really hard," he says. But soon, a turtle in shining armor emerges from Atsumi's gentle hands. The boy, now covered in mud, grins.

Each year on July 4, when the captive turtles are about two to three years old, they're set free. It's Turtle Independence Day—a big celebration, complete with hot dogs and children's games. More than 1,000 visitors showed up in 2005. "We are not restocking the ocean," Laeha explains. "That would be impossible. But we do make sure that the turtles we release are healthy, which will increase their survival chances. We want each turtle to be a success."



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS:

Every July 4, Mauna Lani Resort celebrates Turtle Independence Day, when two- to three-year-old honu in the resort's recovery program are set free.

Turtle Tracking

Success? One microchip-tagged Mauna Lani turtle was released seven miles offshore. Its movements are monitored by a small satellite. It recently completed a nine-month journey of 3,000 miles around the Islands before returning safely to Mauna Lani's reefs. According to Balazs, results such as this are encouraging. Yet it's still too early to tell. Turtles don't reach sexual maturity until they're about 25, which means that Hawai'i's turtle population consists largely of juveniles. It's thought that only one out of 1,000 turtles survives to maturity in the wild.

At a minimum, all these efforts have improved the honu's chances for survival. In 2005, the National Wildlife Federation gave Balazs a National Conservation Achievement Award. His awareness-raising campaign has affected Island attitudes.

Honu, the navigator, is once more the guide of the Islands. In ancient days, the Hawaiian people carved its image in lava petroglyphs to emphasize its significance. Today, honu's beauty inspires us in paintings, in photographs, on note cards, and in books—and, above all, in the life-giving water that surrounds us. Residents and visitors alike are reminded that honu is a trusted and trusting partner, a wise teacher with a story to tell, and an ancient guide with whom we share the ocean's reefs.

"We can all learn from the honu," Akaka says. "We can look at its life and the many difficulties and obstacles it has overcome. We can see that maybe we can do that, too." ■

In the May/June issue of HAWAII WESTWAYS, Hawai'i Island-based journalist Sophia V. Schweitzer reported on the resurgence of traditional Hawaiian healing methods.

It's a Honu World

Turtle Diary

Honu Extravaganza, Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort, Hawai'i Island: Half-day educational event, held each February. (808) 322-3441; www.outriggerkeauhoubeach.com.

Turtle Independence Day, Mauna Lani Resort, Hawai'i Island: Annual event, held on July 4, celebrating the successes of turtle recovery programs. (808) 885-6622; www.maunalaniculture.org.

Where the Honu Are

The Sea Turtle Lagoon at Sea Life Park Hawai'i by Dolphin Discovery, O'ahu: Where the Mauna Lani Resort turtles are hatched. (808) 259-7933; www.sealifeparkhawaii.com.

In the ocean. Log on to the National Marine Fisheries Service website for detailed guidelines and a downloadable survey form for turtle-sighting reports. www.turtles.org/nmfs.

Turtle Etiquette

- **Give sea turtles at least 10 feet of space**, and do not block their path.
- **Keep the ocean and beaches clean**. Sea turtles cannot digest cigarette butts or plastics.
- **Report stranded, sick, injured, or dead sea turtles** to the Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement: O'ahu (808) 587-0077; Maui (808) 984-8110; Kaua'i (808) 274-3521; Hawai'i Island, Hilo (808) 974-6208; Hawai'i Island, Kona (808) 881-4200 or (808) 327-4961.
- **Report harassment, mistreatment, or killing of sea turtles** directly to the NMFS: O'ahu (808) 541-2727 or toll-free (800) 853-1964. —S. V.S.

Animal Houses

Innovative programs at local resorts help protect Hawai'i's wildlife



Watch out, don't step on that big rock under the water!" I told my son, Daniel, as we waded into the ocean near Waikiki. Then the rock moved. It was a honu—a green sea turtle. Daniel and I stood still, mindful that we shouldn't get too close to it. The honu swam past us and headed out to sea.

Since that incident a few years ago, sea turtles have fascinated me. A life-size concrete honu decorates my garden, and two underwater photos of sea turtles hang on my walls, along with a picture that my brother, Jack, painted

of a honu he saw in the ocean. So I was especially interested to read "Return of the Honu," Sophia V. Schweitzer's cover story in this issue of HAWAII WESTWAYS.

As I read about Mauna Lani Resort's honu recovery program, I was reminded of other places in the Islands to see and learn about sea creatures. On O'ahu, there's Waikiki Aquarium and Sea Life Park Hawai'i by Dolphin Discovery. Maui has the Maui Ocean Center, whose new Marine Mammal Discovery Center is scheduled to open in August. Several Island resorts host animals, too. On Hawai'i Island, manta rays swim up to the Sheraton Keauhou Bay Resort & Spa. On O'ahu, resident dolphins play in the lagoon at Kahala Hotel & Resort, and swans and ducks paddle along the waterways at Hilton Hawaiian Village. At all these places, guests can learn about our finned and feathered compatriots and gain appreciation of our relation to the environment.

Also in this issue, contributor Rita Ariyoshi shares her love of swimming at Ko 'Olina ("At the Stroke of Sunset," page 12), automotive expert John Dinkel explains the importance of a car's shocks and struts ("Shock Value," page 20), and our dining columnist Jocelyn Fujii gives her take on a new Japanese restaurant on O'ahu ("A Temple of Good Taste," page 22). Aloha.

Richard E. Velazquez
Regional Manager

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