

Bring Honu Conservation Home

As a citizen volunteer and the co-chair of the Oceania Region of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group, George Balazs recently wrote a letter to the editor to newspapers around the state. The letter said it's time to bring U.S. federal endangered species efforts for green sea turtles back home to Hawai'i.

George, a 33-year NOAA zoologist working with Hawai'i marine turtles, wrote the following in the Hawaii Tribune Herald:

"The cultural revival of the Hawaiian people throughout the past century is one of the many joys I've witnessed since making Hawai'i my home in 1965. Caring for the land and sea, speaking Hawaiian, ocean voyaging, self-determination and the quest for justice all come to mind.

"Who we are is tied to where we are and where we come from. And so it is for the green sea turtle—the honu of Hawai'i. The honu is bonded to the Hawaiian culture genetically, geographically and ecologically. In the early 1970s, the honu's survival was in serious jeopardy until sensible management was restored when the state banned all commercial harvesting of the turtles.

"Since then, the turtle, like the Hawaiian culture itself, has flourished and expanded beyond all expectation.

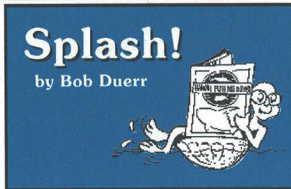
"The time now has come to return stewardship of the honu home to Hawai'i, where it rightfully belongs."

George wrote that there are seven species of ocean turtles swimming the world. As descendants of ancient reptiles, these turtles are culturally woven into sea people's lives who used them for food, fortune telling, pets and funeral totems.

All green sea turtles in Hawai'i share the same genetic lineage. This is a unique subset of the greater global population of green sea turtles. This subset is known as a "Distinct Population Segment," or "Regional Management Unit." In 2012, the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs petitioned NOAA Fisheries that the Hawai'i green sea turtles be a distinct population segment and be removed from listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Ninety percent of turtle's nesting is on French Frigate Shoals, which is controlled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The turtle disease fibro papilloma virus first appeared in 1930s. This widespread affliction manifests as lobed tumors on skin, eyes, mouth and internal organs. The infection frequency seems to be declining.

George and his wife, Linda, presented their paper, "Fall and Rise of the Hawaiian Honu: A 50-Year Witness to Cultural and Conservation," at this August's University of Hawaii Hilo 23rd Annual Hawaii Conservation Conference. They said the good news is that "In 2012, Hawai'i's green turtles, or honu (*Chelonia mydas*), were downlisted from Endangered to the category of Least Concern following a comprehensive assessment by the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group."



The IUCN Species Survival Commission Marine Turtle Specialist Group stated that it has "230 experts in over 80 countries, and the MTSG is the global authority on marine turtle research and conservation."

According to George, the Oceania Region of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group changed the green sea turtle "listing based on a very thorough 2-year-long assessment by a team of 10 globally respected sea turtle scientists."

"The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species" report itself commented, "Analysis of published peer-reviewed literature indicates that the endemic and genetically isolated Hawaiian Green Turtle is approaching full recovery to pre-exploitation levels, continues to grow, and anthropogenic hazards do not appear to be restricting population recovery."

In its Pacific region of over 100 million square miles, IUCN Oceania is committed to "community-based protected area management." With honu recovery, the need for federally mandated Endangered Species Act control diminishes. The Switzerland-based IUCN supports Hawai'i home rule for conservation efforts.

Should the same home rule logic be applied to humpback whale recovery? Instead of seeking ecosystem management and control of one-third of Hawaiian waters, should the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary pat itself on the back for ESA recovery, pack their bags and migrate back to Washington, D.C.?

Not all are rushing to embrace the Balazs and IUCN honu recovery. NOAA now wants to reclassify the turtle from endangered to threatened. The geographical isolation of the Hawaiian green sea turtle is seen as a detriment to recovery.

One cautious view is seen in "Using Historical Data To Assess the Biogeography of Population Recovery," written by John N. Kittinger, Kyle S. Van Houtan, Loren E. McClenachan and Amanda L. Lawrence. John and his group said, "Our data suggest the current concentration of green turtle nesting on French Frigate Shoals is a historical anomaly. Nesting was once widely distributed across the Hawaiian archipelago, from the inhabited MHI throughout the remote atolls of NWHI. Eighty percent of historically major nesting sites have been extirpated or are severely depleted."



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In what could be seen as a barb to IUCN's opinion, John said their "research suggests that assessing recovery without historical data on spatial patterns may overlook important ecological dynamics at the population or ecosystem level, which can result in improper or inadequate conservation assessments and recovery targets."

Like the humpback whale, the honu, though recovering, is still caught in the "land and power in Hawai'i" throw net. With the U.S. bureaucracy's 'ophi-like grabbing power, bringing conservation home to Hawai'i may be harder to untangle than recovering a drowning endangered species from an illegal cross net.

Until September 25, NOAA is accepting comments on delisting Hawai'i green sea turtles. Submit all electronic comments via <<http://www.regulations.gov/#/docketDetail;D=NOAA-NMFS-2012-0154>>, click the "Comment Now!" icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments. Submit written comments to the Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.

Want to see more on IUCN? Visit <<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/16285718/0>>.

Read John Kittinger, et al. at <<http://online.library.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1600-0587.2013.00245.x/abstract>>.

Haseko To Pay \$27 Million

A Circuit Court awarded an 'Ewa Beach class-action lawsuit \$27 million for a marina that was never built. Haseko, a Japanese developer, was told to pay the 1,800 homeowners \$1,300 each. This nearly \$7 million was awarded for a marina not built between One'ula Beach Park and White Plains Beach. The additional \$20 million was tacked on as punitive damages for violating the state's consumer protection laws. Haseko, citing environmental planning delays and cost overruns, has applied to rezone the marina to a "recreational lagoon." Haseko, with 40 years of business experience in Hawai'i, said the punitive damages are ridiculous. Homeowners saw their properties increase in value without a marina and with a lagoon. **continued ...**