

# Tagging Turtles May Save Their Lives



By Rick Klemm,  
University of Hawai'i Sea Grant Extension Service

—Photo by George H. Balazs

The "Sea Turtle Research-University of Hawai'i" sign in front of the pavilion at Punalu'u County Beach Park attracts local residents and visitors alike, who have come by the busload to view the scenic cove. They all want to see the turtles, to "talk story," to ask turtle questions, and to get pictures of, with, and amid the creatures.

Researcher George Balazs and students from the Marine Option Program (MOP) at the University of Hawai'i-Hilo, on this weekend in February, are capturing and studying Hawaiian green turtles from the cove and nearby waters. Balazs, a wildlife biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu, believes that gathering data about the green turtles is essential if they are to be properly managed for their benefit and ours. He explains that, while they are not an endangered species now, they are threatened, which means a dramatic change in their population might put them on the brink of extinction. As a threatened species, they are protected by federal and state laws.

Punalu'u is a sheltered cove with a black sand beach on the southeastern shore of the Big Island. The cove's name means "diving spring" and recalls a Hawaiian practice long ago of diving into the cove with gourds to obtain drinking water from an underwater spring.

*The turtles are carried to and from the beach in innertubes. After tests and tagging are completed, they'll be released, none the worse for wear.*

Punalu'u and other areas along the Ka'u coast have probably been a favorite habitat of Hawaiian green and other turtles for centuries, judging from their mention in local mythology. A turtle named Kauila, according to legend, lived in the spring behind the beach and could assume human form out of water. She played with the children and watched after them as they fished in the spring.

With funding from the University of Hawai'i Sea Grant College Program, Balazs has been capturing and releasing turtles at Punalu'u since late 1983 to learn more about their feeding habits and growth rates. Growth rates among green turtles along the Ka'u coast appear to be more rapid than among green turtles elsewhere in the main Hawaiian Islands. Because of the faster growth rates, Balazs thinks the Ka'u turtle population may make up a large proportion of the breeding colony at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. It is believed that all Hawaiian green turtles go there to breed.

He was attracted to Punalu'u in 1974 when a local couple discovered a clutch of turtle eggs in the sand near their beach concession stand. Possibly because of a red *limu* (algae or seaweed) with the scientific name of *Pterocladia capillacea* and other underwater features, this area along the Ka'u coast may be one of the best feeding grounds for green turtles in the

*(cont. on page 8)*



**TURTLE TAGGING** (cont. from page 7)

main islands. Not much is known about the feeding habits of these turtles because most research has been carried out at breeding and basking sites.

In 1982, 1,300 hatchling green turtles were tagged and released at French Frigate Shoals. Balazs expects some of these hatchlings to settle in feeding grounds along the Ka'u coast. If he is lucky, he may capture a few during his 12-month study at Punalu'u.

To capture turtles without harming them, Balazs and the MOP students use tangle nets laid across "traffic lanes" within the cove between the turtles' feeding and resting grounds. They come inshore at high tide to feed and rest in holes and cracks further offshore.

On the first night of this expedition, the team captured five green turtles, ranging from 30 to 202 pounds. Another was given them by two Filipino fishermen from Pahala, who earlier had talked with MOP student Diane Mazarakis about the research.

In the morning after breakfast, the first thing Balazs does is to "staple" a corrosion-resistant ID tag on the back edge of each front fin close to the body of each turtle. Large turtles are tagged in their rear fins, too. Then he and the students

*The dedication of teams such as this one from the University of Hawai'i-Hilo may spell the difference between life and death for the Hawaiian green turtle.*



—Photo by George H. Balazs

(cont. on page 33)

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## CRAFTING FURNITURE

(cont. from page 30)



This koa bench was constructed by the Rev. George Berkeley Rowell, who served on Kaua'i from 1843 until his death. Although he had no training in carpentry or cabinet making, he completed a number of fine pieces over the years. This piece is constructed like a four-poster bed. The simple, lovely design is a good example of early efforts by missionaries. ☑

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Gently a tag is fixed to a flipper in a painless process that will help researchers document the turtle's life.

—Photo by Rick Klemm

### TURTLE TAGGING (cont. from page 9)

weigh each turtle and measure its head and shell. Finally, Balazs takes a blood sample, in a harmless and painless procedure, from each turtle's neck. The blood will be sent to the Mainland and analyzed to determine the turtles' sexes. You can't tell by just looking at them.

When all the work on a turtle is finished, three or four MOP students carry it to the ocean's edge and release it. As a wave comes in the turtle rides it to slightly deeper water where it can "fly" away in a burst of speed, up to 25 miles per hour.

After the last turtle has been released and the visitors and residents have moved on, the research team prepares for a long afternoon's nap before another night and morning's work with the green turtles. Because of research like this by Balazs and his student team, the Hawaiian green turtle may be around for future generations to enjoy. It's all part of worldwide efforts to save the many finned, feathered and furred creatures we share this planet with. ☑

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# From the Publisher



The September issue of *Manulani* leads off with a story by editor Candace Charlot about Tom Moffatt, local show promoter and one of the original famous Poi Boys of radio K-POI. He's recently gone back to radio with a very early morning program on KIKI and Candace caught up with him at the end of a long day.

September is also the month in which we begin our celebration of Aloha Week, that wonderful week of festivities honoring all the best in Hawaiian culture, which moves from island to island. Associate editor Adrian Mangiboyat Jr. spoke with Kealoha Kalama, a long-time participant, about her feelings concerning Aloha Week and we include a calendar complete as of press time for each island.

I think just about everybody is aware that we share this planet with a number of creatures who now need our care and concern to survive. One example of this is the Hawaiian green turtle. It's not on the endangered species list yet and if a dedicated team in Hawai'i has anything to say about it, they never will be. Follow a turtle tagging team as they round up turtles on the Big Island in a story by Rick Klemm of the Sea Grant Extension Service at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa who explains what it's all about.

That's a round up of our stories this month—good reading!

Lynn Adams Cruger

If you have suggestions concerning the contents of *Manulani*, please drop me a line. Lynn Adams Cruger, Publisher, *Manulani*, This Week Publications, 715 S. King St. Suite 325, Honolulu, Hawaii 96813.

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Cover. Photographer Tomas del Amo caught promoter Tom Moffatt at his office surrounded by memorabilia of his several careers in radio, records and show promotion. See story on page 2.

## "Heavenly Bird"

# MANULANI

The Magazine of Mid Pacific Air

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Published monthly by THIS WEEK PUBLICATIONS, 715 S. King St., Ste. 325, Honolulu, HI 96813 (808)526-1702. Call Toll Free 1-800-232-2519

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