

Turtle rescue mission releases trapped duo

Two green sea turtles that were believed to have been trapped in an enclosed brackish water pond in Ka'u for several years were finally captured, examined and then released back into the ocean.

This rescue mission was a multi-agency collaboration between the University of Hawaii at Hilo Marine Option Program, U.S. National Marine Fisheries Services and Hawaii Preparatory Academy,

led by leading turtle researcher

George Balazs.

"The Ninole Pond in Ka'u, in which the turtles were found, seems to be completely separated from the ocean by old lava flows, but nobody is sure if there are any underwater passages that connect the two," said Balazs.

"The rescue team struggled for nearly five hours to locate the two turtles seen in the pond sporadically for more than three years now.

"It remains a mystery how these turtles got into the pond, and whether they remained there permanently, or if they are able to get back to the ocean," he added.

The turtles were caught using a netting method designed for turtles and were brought out of the pond upon capture.

Both appeared to be generally

healthy. The turtles were weighed, measured and examined before being tagged and released.

"It was discovered later that one of the captured turtles had been previously captured in the ocean, nearby the Ninole Pond, and tagged in February of 1984 by students from the UH-Hilo MOP and USNMFS," Balazs said.

"Its capture during this rescue effort was the first time it has been seen in 18 years." The other turtle was previously untagged.

"Upon release, the turtles swam away swiftly and happily," Balazs said.

"Such a reaction could be an indication that it was time for them to return to the place they call home."

This rescue mission is not the first of its kind. In 1999, Balazs and students from UH-Hilo had rescued a hawksbill turtle that was stranded in a murky pond by the

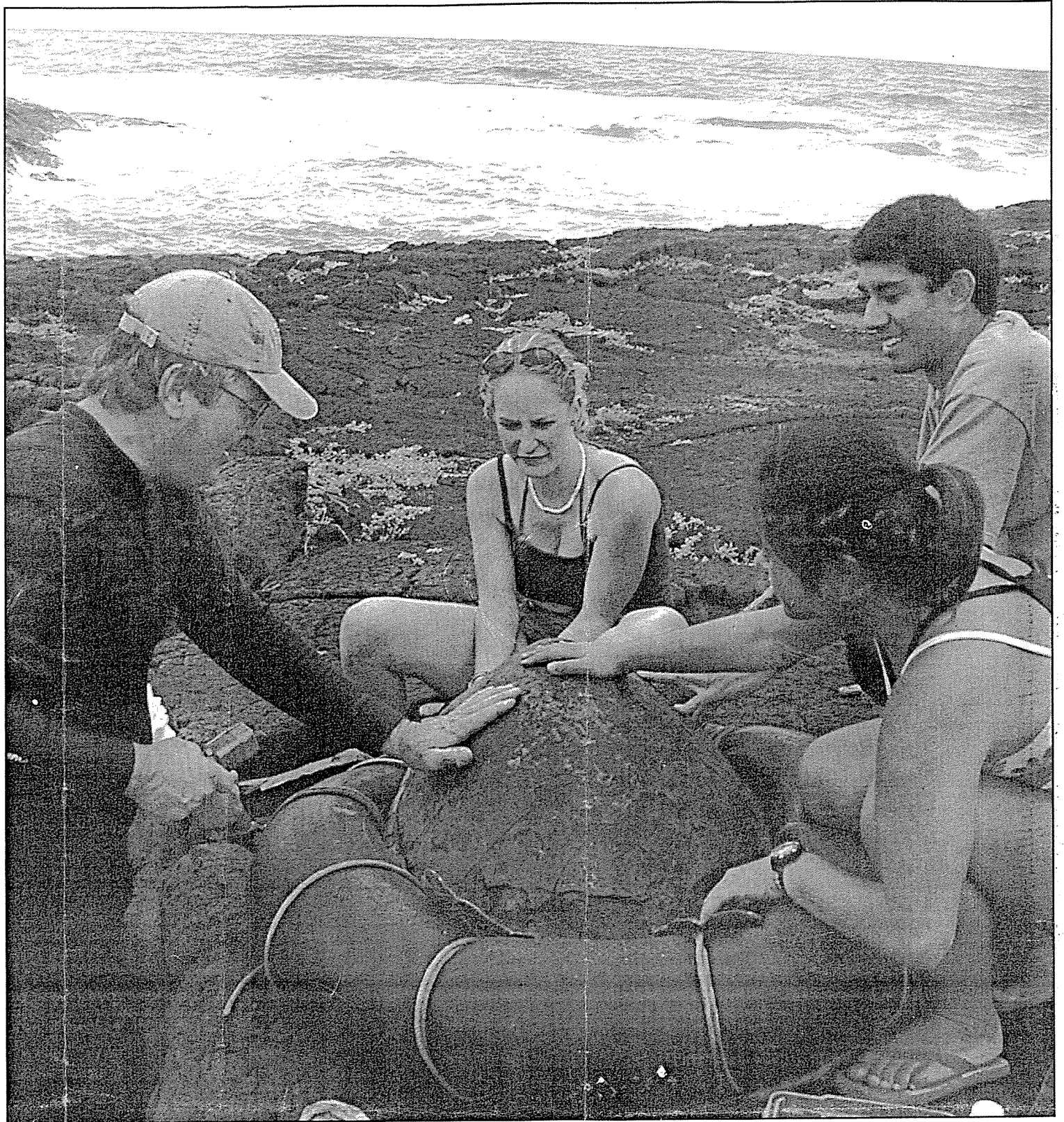
Punaluu Black Sand Beach.

The rescue team removed a fishing line that was wrapped around one of its front flippers, tagged it, checked it for other injuries and then released it back into the ocean.

Such turtle rescue efforts will continue in the future, when the need arises, Balazs said.

"The pond in which the turtles were found seems to be completely separated from the ocean by old lava flows, but nobody is sure if there are any underwater passages that connect the two. The rescue team struggled for nearly five hours to locate the two turtles seen in the pond sporadically for more than three years now.

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