

JUNE 17, 1996

Star-Bulletin



NIGHT FINAL

BY MARK RICE, Special to the Star-Bulletin

Students from Hawaii Preparatory Academy maneuver a green sea turtle into the water after tagging the animal.

Students vital to turtle research on Big Isle

The field hands assist scientists studying the threatened Hawaiian sea creature

BY LEILANI S. HINO
Special to the Star-Bulletin

KOHALA COAST, Hawaii — During his high school years, Scott Lindsey spent many hours observing green sea turtles along Kiholo Bay.

When he graduated from Hawaii Preparatory Academy last year, he took with him an interest in environmental issues, spurred by his fieldwork.

"To actually catch turtles, to actually handle them, be there when they're measured and weighed — it's valuable hands-on experience you can't get any other way," said Lindsey, now a University of Texas computer engineering student who has returned to help with the turtle research this summer.

Since 1987, he and other students at the private school have helped scientists study the threatened Hawaiian green sea turtle, which has suffered from mysterious viruses, marine debris dumped by humans and destruction of nesting sites.

Each year, 60 students in grades eight to 12 sign up for the National Marine

Fisheries Service Cooperative Sea Turtle Research Program, said assistant headmaster Marc Rice.

"It got me into understanding the behavior of sea animals," said Lindsey. "And it definitely made me look at the ocean and wildlife management in a totally different way."

The students work under the supervision of George Balazs, zoologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Balazs, leader of the Honolulu Laboratory Marine Turtle Research Program, has conducted long-term studies of green sea turtles in nearshore waters for more than two decades.

His studies chronicle growth rates, food sources, habitat use, developmental and reproductive migrations, underwater behaviors, health status and population trends of the creatures.

Kiholo Bay, on the Kohala Coast of the Big Island, is one area of focus. And the students serve as field assistants on his West Hawaii data collection expeditions.

"These young people have been instrumental in helping our agency make major advances in the knowledge of sea turtles residing in coastal waters of the

Big Island," he said. "I couldn't function without them."

The students help Balazs capture, measure and tag sea turtles at Honaunau, Kahaluu, Kiholo, Mauna Lani and Puako.

The students hand-capture turtles by snorkeling at night or by using large-mesh tangle nets carefully tended to prevent injury, Balazs said.

A recent research project involved spending 600 hours, both during the day and night, tracking 10 turtles at Kiholo Bay.

Rice said the fieldwork and hands-on experience help students understand the importance of data collection.

Beyond academic benefits, students gain on-the-job experience in teamwork and self-esteem. "When you've got 15 or 20 people going on an overnight field trip, a lot of logistics and planning go into it," Rice said.

And the students learn about themselves.

"It takes something to jump in the water when it's pitch black at night — a moment of self-evaluation, learning you can do things you never knew you could. It helps build self-esteem."