

# AN ENCHANTING ENCOUNTER

THE LEGEND AND MYTHS OF THE BELOVED HAWAIIAN HONU

BY ANDREW WALSH





**H**awai'i has always been home to great ocean navigators. The early Marquesan and Tahitian settlers decoded the stars and interpreted the weather and waves, finding a course that was true, landing them safely in the bountiful embrace of this remote island realm. Humpback whales using knowledge known only to their kind steer their young over unfathomable distances to return each year to the shelter of the warm waters surrounding the islands. So, too, the great *bonu* (turtle) found their way here millions of years ago. These skilled navigators continue to astound and bewilder humans by voyaging into the vast, featureless Pacific every 3-4 years to known protected beaches anywhere from 500 miles up to 1,500 miles away from their local feedings grounds. Piloting to these remote nesting sites, they give birth to the next generation who will also return someday to the very same beach again and again.

Although Hawai'i is within the range of six different Pacific sea turtles including olive ridleys, loggerheads and leatherbacks, it is just the green sea turtle (*bonu*) and hawksbill (*bonu 'ea*) that are regulars on the shoreline. And out of the seven different species of sea turtles in the world, the green sea turtle is considered the friendliest—meaning there have been reports of *bonu* following snorkelers and divers around at coral reefs.

There are few other places on this blue planet where turtles and people live so closely as in the Hawaiian Islands. In many tropical locales the idea of just seeing a turtle ambling by in the water or basking about enjoying the warm sunshine on the beach is a rarity. In Hawai'i, it's just another day. Most commonly seen are the green sea turtles, and for good reason. Most sea turtles warm themselves by swimming in shallow warm waters, but not so with the green. It chooses to lie on the beach and soak in the sun like its human co-habitants. Very few sea turtles leave the water for anything other than nesting. But greens know a good thing when they find it. Like so many others who have discovered these islands, Hawai'i has a unique flow and way unto itself for all of the creatures that make it home.

Less commonly seen are the hawksbills. Named for their tapered head, which ends in a sharp point (resembling a beak), they also have bird-like claws on the end of their flippers. An easy way to distinguish them from greens is the serrated edges adorning the ends of their multi-colored carapace (shell). Green turtles also display a more round, heart-shaped shell and are generally larger than hawksbills. Greens are actually one of the largest marine turtles, growing upwards of 700-lbs, while hawksbills usually never surpass 150 lbs. Generally most turtles are omnivores, eating things



like mollusks, marine algae, crustaceans, sea urchins, fish, and jellyfish. A hawksbill's favorite meal is sponges! But green sea turtles are vegetarians, at least once they become adults, a true oddity at least in the turtle world. And although they appear various shades of brown, black, and yellow, green sea turtles are so named because their internal fat is green-colored as a result of their unique diet.

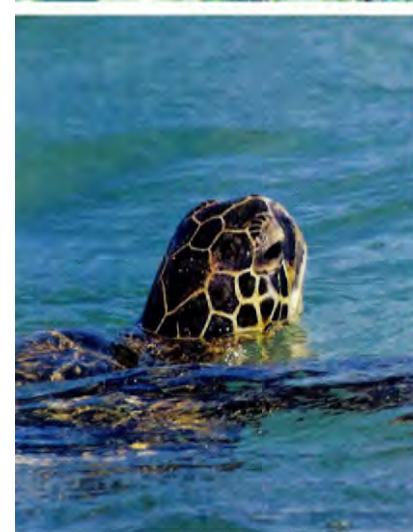
Regardless of which turtle you happen upon here, make no mistake about the cultural significance and *mana* (spiritual power), which these ancient ancestors possess. They were reserved for eating by only the royal *ali'i* class. It was thought that their longevity and endurance would enhance the sacred life force of any who consumed them. The creation chant of the Hawaiian people, the *Kumulipo*, has multiple references to turtles—"Born is the turtle living in the sea, Guarded by the Maile seedlings living on land." *Honu* were considered *'aumākua* (guardian spirits) that could change shape and protect one from enemies. They acted as a spiritual force that could attract and unite lovers; and so powerful was their *mana*, they provided the foundation for entire islands to be grounded with the earth.

The name *Kailua-Kona* has special significance in Hawaiian turtle mythology. A sacred guardian of *keiki* (children), Kailua was the name given to a sacred turtle that could change shape into a girl, the offspring of two great, some say supernatural sea turtles, who dug a small hole which formed a freshwater pool where Kailua was to hatch forth from. This "*keiki* pond" from which she grew would forever bind her as the guardian of the young and the bringer of freshwater to the islands.

There are even myths that turtles helped to guide the ancient Hawaiians to these islands. Not surprisingly, time spent in the water with these spiritual creatures offers those listening an intuitive sense of the power and truth behind the legends. Even a glimpse of one on land, springs forth a feeling from deep inside our consciousness that we are in the presence of something ancient and sublime. But like all creatures that bridge the natural and spiritual world, they share a common frailty. No matter how great their *mana*, they are bound to the destructive devises of the creatures and ecosystems in which they dwell.

Since the onslaught of European colonization, the Hawaiian sea turtles have been harvested for their beautiful shells and prized eggs to the point of near extinction. The green sea turtles in Hawai'i are a genetically unique species found only in Hawai'i. They nest almost exclusively in French Frigate Shoals and live in the shallow bays and reef ecosystems around the islands. But by the 1960s, they were nearly wiped out. Fortunately, the 1978 US Endangered Species Act gave these ancient turtles, which watched the dinosaurs come and go, a new chapter to their near 200-million-year-old story. We nearly wrote a premature end to this saga, but since gaining protection in the 1970s, turtles have lived up to their legendary powers and surprised scientists with a "supernatural" ability to rebound.

The number of nesters in the French Frigate Shoals rookery has increased more than scientists thought possible and the turtle population throughout the islands has increased in abundance 53% over the last 25 years. This is particularly amazing given that turtles do not reach sexual maturity for 25-40 years, live upwards of 80 years (some live past 100!), and can no longer utilize nesting sites in the main Hawaiian Islands due to loss of habitat and development. (Although it should be noted that population estimates of turtles are





difficult to assess and there are very few reliable long-term abundance estimates. Also green sea turtle populations worldwide are in much worse shape.) Sea turtles can lay over a hundred eggs in one nest and have between 2-8 nests per season. This may seem like a lot of new turtles being added to the population, but sadly scientists estimate that only one out of a 1,000 hatchlings make it to adulthood since many are killed by birds, cats, dogs, mongoose, crabs and large fish.

But no matter how resilient, their connection to the land, sea, and well being of the people invites a vulnerability to the worldly woes of neglect and complacency. Although adult turtles have few natural predators, the tiger shark being the most prominent, it is the new dangers they face of habitat destruction, pollution, ingestion of trash and plastics, vessel strikes, entanglement in fishing lines, continual harvesting, and most recently outbreaks of disease which continue to threaten them. A recent resurgence of *fibropapillomatosis*, a herpes-type virus causing white cauliflower-like tumors, has become the most pressing threat, potentially reversing the conservation progress achieved. With no known cure, the tumors spread internally and externally inhibiting foraging, breathing, movement, and digestion depending on the location.

In recent years on the shores of Maui, for example, 96% of stranded or dead green sea turtles had tumors. It isn't clear what is causing the growths, but in many parts of the world an increase in the virus also coincides with an increase in human activity, suggesting that dietary or environmental modification co-factors resulting from pollutants, such as wastewater and agriculture runoff, might be the culprit. Interestingly, hawksbill are mostly immune to the virus, but why is unclear. In fact, little at all is known about how and why green turtles get the virus.

Regardless, we do know some things—green sea turtles are still listed as *endangered* and hawksbill are *critically endangered*. Besides the federal Endangered Species Act, Hawai'i state law also protects Hawaiian turtles. They are so sacred to these islands and its people, that to harass, injure, or even touch one is illegal, a violation that

could cost thousands of dollars and prison time. Much like the ancient Hawaiian laws, turtles are *kapu* (forbidden) and must be left unharmed. Yet we indirectly harm *honu*, and ourselves, by living without regard to the consequences our prolific presence has on the balance in this world, the sanctity of its creatures, and ultimately our own security.

Like the *honu* and human navigators who must move forward into uncharted waters, burdensome decisions are made with foresight backed by hindsight. We can all do something to aid turtles on their continued journey alongside us. And we all know what we risk losing if we don't. Sea turtles deposit large amounts of nutrients on beaches aiding the growth of dune vegetation thus "anchoring" the shoreline, just as in Hawaiian mythology. They also act as guardians and control the growth of seagrass beds, which serve as nurseries for juvenile reef fish. With the loss of sea turtles, many other species would soon follow. And as a critical member of the reef ecosystem, a spiritual guide and companion to the people, and a valuable source of tourism revenue, we would ultimately lose too great a part of our own story and our own future in sacrificing theirs.

If you see turtles basking on the beach or in the water while snorkeling, admire them from a reasonable distance and do not alter their natural behavior. Never get between a turtle and its escape to the open ocean or the surface. Please do not attempt to touch, feed, or harass sea turtles. Let them come to you and if they don't, let them be your guide towards learning how to relax and just be. Although a sea turtle can hold its breath for hours, it can drown in a matter of minutes when stressed.

There are known "cleaning stations" around the Hawaiian Islands where it is not uncommon to see green sea turtles gather and hover as the many colorful species of cleaner fish rise from the vibrant reef and eat algae, dead skin, and parasites off their bodies. Spending a cool morning or hot afternoon watching a *honu* get its shell polished is probably the best way to encourage some peace and comfort for turtles and people alike. I highly recommend it!

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