

Turtle Recuperating at Ala Wai Harbor

By Harry Whitten
Star-Bulletin Writer

Green sea turtles don't ordinarily live in Ala Wai Boat Harbor, but one is there now, a 250-pound female feeling somewhat under the weather.

The turtle's weakened condition may have something to do with her decision to reside in the harbor's calm waters, according to George Balazs, a biologist who has studied sea turtles for years.

In addition, the harbor at times has jellyfish that green turtles find attractive for food, Balazs said.

After getting telephone calls from concerned boat owners and other persons, Balazs swam underwater to where the turtle had been seen sleeping.

He observed large tumors on the back portion of the turtle's shell and hind flippers and which he said may be the cause of the turtle's weakened condition.

The cause of such tumors on Hawaiian green sea turtles is so far unknown, but their occurrence seems to be on the increase, he said. In some turtles, even young ones, the tumors grow so extensively that the eyes become covered over, he said.

During the past few years tissue

samples of tumors removed from dead turtles found washed ashore have been sent to a specialist at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., but no conclusive explanation has been found yet. The analyses are continuing.

Balazs found that the turtle at Ala Wai Boat Harbor had on her front flippers numbered identification tags that he had placed on her when he found her nesting at French Frigate Shoals, a unit of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, in June 1978.

French Frigate Shoals are about 500 miles northwest of Honolulu and are the principal breeding site for the Hawaiian green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*).

Tagging studies show that adult green sea turtles regularly migrate back and forth between French Frigate Shoals and numerous sites in the Hawaiian chain of islands, Balazs said.

The public is asked not to disturb the turtle at the boat harbor, but to give her every opportunity to recover from her ailment.

Sea turtles are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and wildlife laws of the state of Hawaii.

What's green and sick and should be left alone?

By Barbara Hastings
Advertiser Science Writer

If you see a big green sea turtle in the Ala Wai Boat Harbor, leave her alone. She's sick and trying to recuperate. You can't help her.

Besides, if you try, you could be in line for stiff fines — green sea turtles are considered threatened and are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act. You not only can't eat one, you can't take custody of one — not even for the highest humanitarian motives.

And if the fines don't frighten you, the Hawaiian green sea turtle also is currently being protected by people who use the boat harbor. Unless you've got some credentials, they're reluctant to tell you where to look for her, says George Balazs, Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology green turtle specialist.

The 250-pound turtle was first spotted in the boat harbor a year and a half ago, Balazs says, but he never could find it until early August when "it was right there, sleeping underwater." Then,

Balazs says, he dived down to investigate and found the turtle had several large tumors on the back of its shell and hind flippers.

Balazs isn't positive that this sick female turtle is the same one that's been spotted in the harbor for the past 18 months, but he thinks so.

Balazs says tumors of the kind found on the Ala Wai harbor turtle are increasing, but despite attempts by the Smithsonian Institution to find the cause, no conclusive results have been found.

Balazs has been doing green turtle research for a number of years, and part of that work has involved tagging turtles at the French Frigate Shoals, where the sea creatures nest, so the migration patterns can be studied.

The Ala Wai harbor turtle has tags on its front flippers that Balazs put there in June 1978.

He said the boat harbor is not an attractive place for a normally healthy turtle, and he thinks she's resting there because of her weakened condition.