

Hard Times for Green Sea Turtles

Tumor Cases Increasing Dramatically

By Helen Altonn
Star-Bulletin Writer

Hawaiian green sea turtles are being found in increasing numbers washed up on beaches distressed and weakened by tumors, concerned scientists report.

The tumor cases have grown from six or seven per year from 1982-84 to 18 in 1985 and 31 last year, said George Balazs, sea turtle specialist at the National Marine Fisheries Service's Honolulu Laboratory.

The endangered animal has many survival problems, from predators to human debris floating in the ocean. But the tumor problem is so serious that the Hawaiian Sea Turtle Recovery Team has given it highest priority for research, Balazs said.

"We don't even know the cause of the tumors," said Richard Wass, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Special funding is needed to try to figure out what is happening, Balazs and Wass emphasized in an interview. Both are recovery team members.

They said the tumors occur on the turtle's neck, eyes, flippers, jaw, tail and sometimes in the mouth and throat.

Weakened and debilitated animals are susceptible to sharks and other enemies, and their ability to migrate and feed is restricted, Balazs said. They become entangled in fishing gear because "the lumpy thing hanging out is likely to snag on a net."

IF THERE'S A chance that the animal can care for itself in the wild, it is put back after it is found beached. If the turtle is so weak that it can't care for itself, it is taken to the NMFS's Kewalo Basin Research Facility, Balazs said. "We're doing the best we can in a hospice situation."

He said Dr. Patrick Leadbeater, Honolulu Zoo veterinarian, voluntarily operated on a turtle that beached itself at Haleiwa in May. The turtle was "in severe distress" with tumors around its eyes and neck and in its throat, blocking the entrance to its windpipe.

It was the first time such surgery had been done, and tissue was sent to the Smithso-



By Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

TURTLE TUMORS—Federal scientists George Balazs, left, and Richard Wass inspect tumors growing on a turtle at the Kewalo Basin Research Facility.

nian Institution and other agencies for study, Balazs said.

He said Leadbeater spent hours removing the tumors, but 2½ months later they had started growing back.

Balazs speculates that the tumors may be the result of an infective process. He believes it's caused by blood flukes, or

internal parasites, which shed eggs that lodge in tissue which "responds into big, bulbous tumors."

Blood flukes were found in the tissue of the turtle that was operated on, he said.

WASS SAID THE problem may be linked to the green tur-

tle's diet, which is primarily vegetarian. Almost no tumors have been reported among meat-eating species of turtles, he said.

If eggs of an internal parasite are causing the tumors, the turtles may be getting them from a little snail or another animal that lives on the algae eaten by the snails, Balazs said.

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