

# Embattled sea turtle also fighting disease

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Illegal fishing and unattended gill nets still are major problems for the recovery of the green sea turtles in Hawaii, but a herpes virus looms as the greatest threat to its survival.

Populations of Hawaiian green sea turtles, which are fabulous swimmers and navigators, have made some headway after becoming rare in Hawaiian waters two decades ago, but they're still at great risk, according to researchers and a new draft re-

covery plan for the sea turtle.

Many turtles around Hawaii and elsewhere are inflicted with a disease that causes large tumors to emerge from fleshy parts of their bodies. The tumors can interfere with their swimming, can block their mouths and can appear around the eyes, blinding them.

National Marine Fisheries Service researcher George Balazs said years of study still hasn't pinpointed the cause of the tumors, but the most likely candidate is a herpes virus. The recovery plan, to which Balazs con-



Photo courtesy of Lynn Ekstrom

The green sea turtle: making headway in Hawaiian waters, but still at risk.

tributed, calls the tumors "the single most significant threat to the green turtle's survival."

The plan was written by a team of international experts for the National

See Turtles, ~~Eggs~~

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Marine Fisheries Service, and included Hawaii researchers. It says green sea turtles are endangered or threatened in all oceans and proposes an extensive program for the recovery of the species around the world.

"Unattended gill nets are just an astounding problem. They've been banned in just about every other state," said National Marine Fisheries researcher John Naughton. In Hawaii, gill nets can legally be left unattended for up to two hours. A turtle caught in such a net drowns in an hour or less.

Worldwide, turtles are killed by fishing, entrapped by marine debris and ravaged by disease. Their nesting grounds are

## HOW TO HELP

### What to do if you see turtles in distress:

If you find a turtle in trouble, or which appears ill, call the National Marine Fisheries Service at 973-2837 or 943-1240. On weekends and after hours call a beeper at 288-5685.

Illegal or unattended gill nets can be reported to the state Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement at 587-0077.

killing grounds in some areas, where people wait for egg-laying females and slaughter them, and dig up the eggs for food.

Turtles here face several other threats by land and by sea:

■ On developed beaches, sand compacted by heavy use and

heavy equipment can kill eggs, and hatchlings can get trapped in deep tire ruts.

■ Turtles are killed by impact with high-speed watercraft.

■ Silt runoff and pollution can damage the sea grass beds where they feed.

Fishing in Hawaii was a major factor in the decline of the animals around our waters, and it still plays a role in preventing a full-scale return.

Green sea turtles get their name from the color of their fat. They begin life as eggs laid in holes in the sand. Miniature turtles, with shells not much bigger than a silver dollar, scramble up out of the sand and head to sea.

The plan calls for more research, both on the disease and on other facets of the turtle's

behavior and biology. Two other key areas listed in the plan for the recovery of turtles:

■ Dealing with the issue of unattended fishing gear, particularly gill nets, that regularly traps and drowns green sea turtles in Hawaii. The plan estimates that tens of thousands of turtles are killed in the Pacific annually by active or abandoned nets.

■ Protecting nesting beaches. While most Hawaii green sea turtles migrate to French Frigate Shoals, many nest in the main Hawaiian Islands where heavy equipment can injure eggs and hatchlings, light on the beach at night can confuse hatchlings and keep them from finding their way to the sea, and seawalls can prevent them from nesting at all.