

The Turtle Doc Of Hawaii

Dr. Robert Morris has saved hundreds of injured sea turtles after they're hit by boats or tangled in fishing lines

By YU SHING TING

When a sick or injured sea turtle is retrieved by the National Marine Fisheries Service, they call Dr. Robert Morris, aka the Turtle Doc.

Morris has been the only contract veterinarian for the NMFS turtle stranding response team for over a decade, treating about 40 to 50 turtles a year.

"The most exciting cases are the ones that we can help out," says Morris. "We see a lot of line entanglements, and we have to do flipper amputations because the line usually will get wrapped around the flipper and cut through the bone. But they do quite well with three flippers. We also do some shell repair, like when they're hit by boats. And we had to sometimes wire the shell together.

"The ones that are the most frustrating are ones with fibropapilloma tumors because those we can't do as much. When they come in they're pretty sick."

Morris was a veterinary practitioner and owner of Makai Animal Clinic in Kailua for 27 years before selling it last month. He is retired from active practice, but continues to do sea turtle work at the clinic.

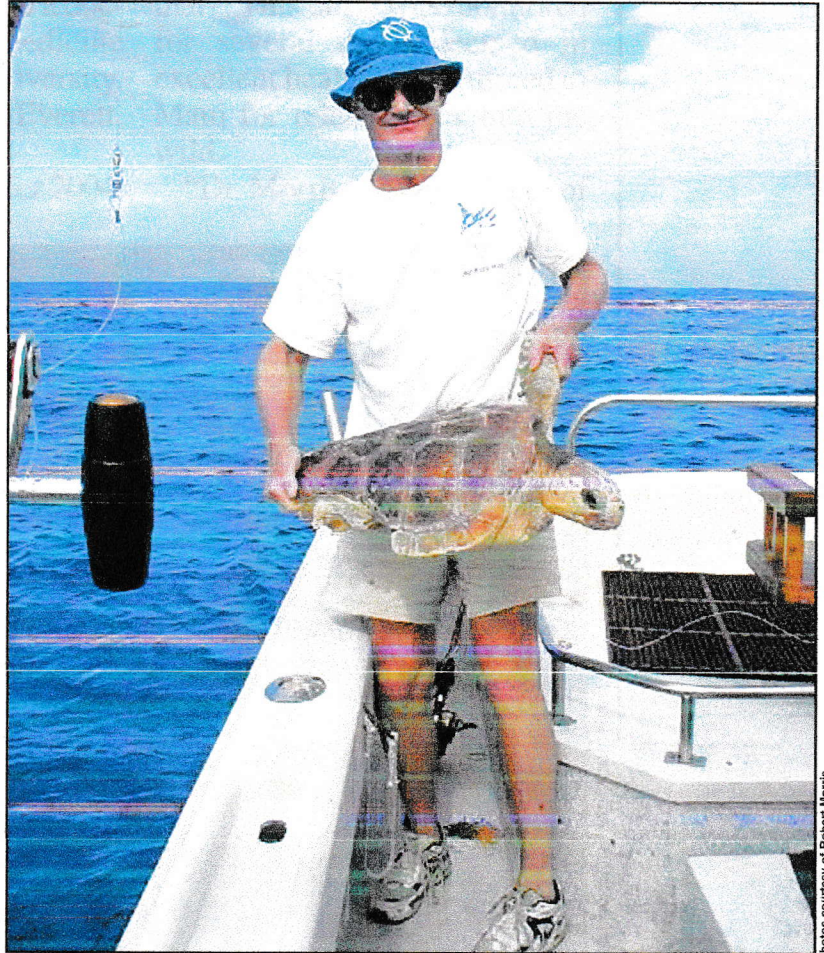
"The biggest difference

between working on turtles and on common pets like cats and dogs is the fact that turtles are reptiles," says Morris. "Their metabolism is much slower, so it takes them a very long time to recover from the anesthesia. And just the dosage of the medication we use, it lasts a lot longer in sea turtles than it does in mammals because they're cold-blooded creatures. So they're completely different as far as their reaction to medication and anesthesia."

Morris also takes care of the turtles at Mauna Lani on the Big Island. His past experience includes assistant director at the Waikiki Aquarium, curator at Marineland in Florida and curator at the New York Aquarium.

"Dr. Morris began doing sea turtle veterinary work for our program initially because he expressed an interest in treating sea turtles," says Cody Hooven, a biological research technician for the NMFS Marine Turtle Research Program. "Eventually, he gained experience treating the animals, and now has more experience with sea turtles than any vet in the state of Hawaii, and is the only qualified veterinarian to provide the best treatment possible."

There are five species of tur-



Dr. Robert Morris releases a loggerhead turtle after treating it for shark bites to its rear and front flippers

Photos courtesy of Robert Morris



Dr. Robert Morris repaired this cracked shell and saved the turtle. The injury was probably caused by a boat strike

tles found in Hawaiian waters — the leatherback, olive ridley, loggerhead, hawksbill and Hawaiian green sea turtle. All are listed and protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and wildlife laws of the state of Hawaii, which means that they can't be har-

vested, caught, or have any parts possessed.

"Generally speaking their population, since they've been put on the endangered list, has come back almost to normal," says Morris. "The most common cases we see are fibropapilloma tumors, which is a virus caused by herpes, and fishing line entanglement from nets. And I think we get a lot of interaction between the turtles and fishermen and nets mainly because there's more turtles and there's more fisherman."

Morris is on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and treats any sick or injured sea turtle that is retrieved by the NMFS. Most of the turtles are green sea turtles, and mostly found on Oahu.

When a turtle is retrieved from a Neighbor Island, called in by one of the NMFS's col-

laborating sea turtle stranding teams, it is immediately flown to Oahu for treatment by Morris. But there are also times when Morris is flown to a Neighbor Island to provide the treatment.

"One interesting case happened about two years ago when I flew over to Kona because they had a turtle with a hook in its flipper," recalls Morris. "It was a big turtle, so they drove it to the airport. I flew over and we went and parked under a tree and did surgery on the turtle. I took the hook out and then they took the turtle back and let it go. It was a big turtle; it weighed several hundred pounds."

Morris, who lives in Kailua with his wife Sally, has a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Delaware, a mas-

The Turtle Doc

FROM PAGE 10

ter's in marine biology from the University of Hawaii, and a doctor of veterinarian medicine degree from Cornell University. The couple have a son, Everett, who lives in Seattle.

From 1990 to September 2004,

ies or organs were at risk, Dr. Morris unceremoniously yanked the spear out. How low-tech is that?! This turtle was monitored for several days, deemed in excellent health, and returned to Maui for release back into the wild.

"Dr. Morris is a crucial part of

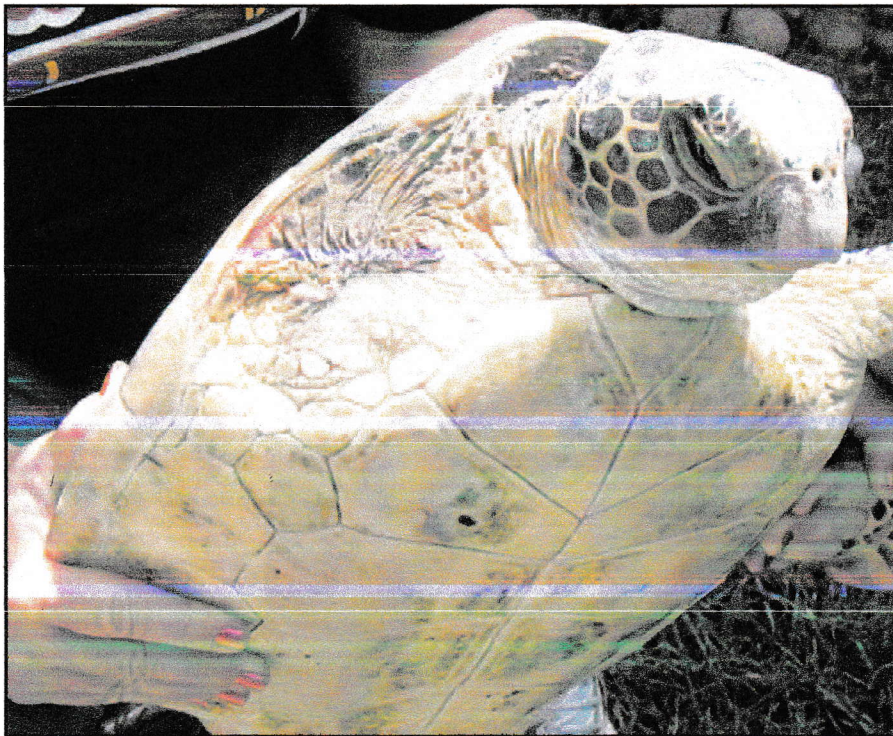


Photo courtesy of Robert Morris

Dr. Robert Morris saved this turtle by amputating an injured flipper caused by fishing line entanglement

the NMFS, with the help of Morris, has been able to rescue, rehabilitate and release back to the ocean 357 marine turtles in the Hawaiian Islands.

"One of my most memorable Dr. Morris cases was when I was assisting him recently in the treatment of a turtle from Maui that had the end of a spear stuck in its head," recalls Hooven. "After X-rays and examination determining no barbs were present on the spear shaft and no major arter-

ies or organs were at risk, Dr. Morris unceremoniously yanked the spear out. How low-tech is that?! This turtle was monitored for several days, deemed in excellent health, and returned to Maui for release back into the wild.

"Dr. Morris is a crucial part of

our sea turtle stranding program, and we couldn't do our work without him. Most importantly, he is easy to work with and has a great sense of humor, and this combined with his concern for the turtles, makes him Dr. Honu to us."

To report any turtles stranded ashore sick, injured or dead, call 983-5730 (Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.) or 288-5685 (weekends, holidays and after hours).