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HPA students helping monitor turtle population

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Turtle researcher George Balazs checks a turtle's mouth for injury and disease as HPA seventh grader Jennifer Lyon and beachgoers look on Thursday, Feb. 5 at Kahaluu Beach Park. (Hawaii247.org photos by Karin Stanton)

Karin Stanton/Hawaii247.org Contributing Editor

Some of his helpers were still running around in diapers when George Balazs first encountered a couple of the turtles, but that's part of what delights the biologist and turtle researcher.

Balazs, one of the first marine scientists in Hawaii to recognize the importance of studying green sea turtles, has been linking up with students across the state for more than two decades. From University of Hawaii in Hilo to Hawaii Preparatory Academy, Balazs is a familiar field trip leader to beaches and bays around the Big Island.

“We try to get to multiple tagging sites every year,” Balazs said. “But today is the first time we’ve been back here in two years.”

“The whole program has two big goals,” he said, watching as four HPA middle and high school students carry another turtle across the sand at Kahaluu Beach Park on day last week.



Students and beachgoers gather around turtle researcher George Balazs as he examines a young specimen Thursday, Feb. 5 at Kahaluu Beach Park.

“We want to give youngsters an opportunity to do the field studies, to dig into the science,” he said. “Even if they become bankers or what not, they get this great learning experience.”

Joining Marc Rice, HPA’s Director of Science and Technology, were a handful of seventh graders and high schoolers at the Kahaluu Beach Park tagging operation.

Seventh graders Kelly Kumobe, Jennifer Lyon and Kristiana Van Pernis said they were surprised by how docile and peaceful the turtles were.

“I thought they would be way harder to catch,” Van Pernis said. “But they’re really pretty easy. You just swim up to them.”

Lyon said they were a little tougher to hold on to than catch.

“They’re a lot stronger than I thought,” she said. “Even one flipper is really strong.”

Kumobe said she agreed with Balazs that the program has two good things.

“Being able to hold a turtle is really great,” she said. “They’re endangered and if we don’t protect them, we won’t have them anymore.”

That’s the main thrust of Balazs’ second goal: raise public awareness, educate residents and visitors, and support his marine turtle research through NOAA’s Pacific Island Fisheries Science Center on Oahu.



Turtle researcher George Balazs and HPA student carry a turtle along Kahaluu Beach Park during a turtle tagging day Thursday, Feb. 5.

Balazs and his student helpers examine the turtles for disease and injury, weigh and measure the turtles, recording the details and making sure they are tagged with a microchip before launching them straight back into the bay.

In one day last week, they examined at least nine turtles; at least four of those already had a microchip. Records on one dated to 1999 and another first was tagged in 2002.

Even those are young for turtles, which can live 60 to 80 years and do not reach sexual maturity until about 35 years.

“All of them look nice and healthy today,” Balazs said. “Although some of them could probably eat a little more.”



HPA students and beachgoers follow turtle researcher George Balazs as he carries a turtle back to the ocean Thursday, Feb. 5 at Kahaluu Beach Park.