

Hong Kong (August 13, 1999)-- Authorities have freed an endangered sea turtle that drew thousands of worshippers to a temple on a fishing boat. Government officials confiscated the green sea turtle last week from the temple of Tin Hau, where it was worshipped for its supposed magical and protective powers. The reptile later was released into the sea, Agriculture and Fisheries Department spokesman Peter Hung said.

Worshippers of Tin Hau [Mazu], or the Goddess of the Sea, accused the government of insensitivity. "They totally insulted my religion," said Leung Yau, who runs the floating temple on a remodeled boat moored at a typhoon shelter. Fishermen caught the baby turtle four years ago and decided to raise it. They soon discovered it had special powers and brought it to the temple, Leung said.

"Before a typhoon or bad weather, it would flip its flippers furiously and make us all wet, as if it was warning us not to go to the sea," he said. "The turtle belongs to Tin Hau and was given to us to protect us."

More than 100,000 people visited the temple each year to pat the turtle and throw coins into its tank for good luck, he said. Leung said he had planned to pick an auspicious day this fall to release the creature, after performing religious rituals to thank the sea goddess.

The Agriculture Department's Hung said the government's action "had nothing to do with religion. We were trying to conserve a highly endangered species, and everything was done in accordance with the law." he said.

Most of Hong Kong's 6.8 million residents worship some kind of Chinese deity. Turtles are revered for their magical powers and as a sign of longevity, and turtle shells are sometimes used in fortune telling.