



Angels of the Sea
Honu and Ecotourism at Laniakea Beach

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An awesome and rare natural event has been taking place recently on a popular beach on the North Shore of Oahu. Mature, 250 pound Hawaiian green sea turtles called *honu* in Hawaiian are basking daily in the northern corner of the beautiful, popular beach know as Laniakea. Local residents and visitors from around the world can easily see and interact with these marine reptiles up close. This unique situation --the green turtles usually bask in isolated areas-- has developed into an ecotourism hot spot and is creating new social interaction problems for the turtles, residents, and tourists.

Laniakea is the first large beach visible from Kamehameha highway as you approach the North coast of Oahu. The Hawaiian translation of Laniakea is "heavenly white beach." It has always been a popular food resource area in the Paumalu ahupuaa because of its fresh water stream, and reefs plentiful with *limu*, shellfish, fish, turtle, and shark (Wright 1997).

There are seven types of marine sea turtles in U.S. waters. The five that frequent Hawaii are greens, hawksbills, leatherbacks, loggerheads,

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and olive ridleys. These turtles are important to the ecology of their environment because they are the only animals that eat jellyfish and sponges (Jackson 2005). Grazing on their favorite diet of seaweed helps control sea grass growth. Also basking on the beach gives them a retreat from their territorial neighbors and main predator --the tiger Sharks (Gulko 2004).

The *honu* that frequent Laniakea beach are actually brown colored but derive their name from the green color of their fat, formerly used as the main ingredient of the popular dish --turtle soup. The turtles' largely vegetarian diet consists mainly of algae and seaweed known as *limu* in Hawaiian. The size of their carapace (shell) averages 40 inches in length, and they can weigh 400 pounds and live to be 60-70 years old (Balazs 2005). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Hawaiian turtle biologist George Balazs has monitored the green turtles' nesting sites at a northwestern island --French Frigate Shoal--since 1973. That year he counted 67 turtles. In 2004 there were 500 nests there. In a personal communication (Sept. 2005) he said, "I'm happy to be worrying about people feeding the turtles, rather than killing and eating them as they did in the 70's".

Many peoples are known to have practiced totemism-- the worship

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of animal spirits. They believed these totems protected their group from bad weather, bad neighbors, and other bad spirits. The nineteenth century German linguist and scholar; Friedrich Max Muller labeled the ancient religious practice of nature worship "naturism". As a proponent of the evolutionist idea of psychic unity he believed that all humans share similar mental states, but he stressed that there were many different forms of totemism, and societies evolved different stages of religious beliefs at different times.

Honu are important in Hawaiian culture. Anthropocentrism was contrary to their beliefs. Historically the Polynesians hunted turtles for their meat and shells, but there were strict cultural subsistence rules that helped protect the turtles. In ancient Hawaii some foods such as turtle, shark, ulua, pork, coconut, and breadfruit were kapu or forbidden for women to eat because they were used as gifts for the gods (De Gener 1975). Honu were considered excellent eating, and their shells were used to make fishhooks and tools for scraping the olona bark. Kamehameha the Great used a turtle shell cup for his medicinal drinks (Malo 1951). Sea turtles are considered *aumakua*, ancestral spiritual guardians, to Hawaiian natives. A well known Hawaiian legend recorded by Mary Pukui tells the adventures of a

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supernatural honu named Kauila. She turned into a little human girl to guard the children swimming around the black sands beach of Punalu'u on the island of Hawaii. Also there is a honu hula, a dance which imitates the movements of the turtles (Pukui 1986).

Due to the research and efforts of George Balazs the honu became protected by Hawaii state law in 1974. In 1978 they were added to the Federal Endangered Species Act, which was established in 1973. The original laws stated that killing, capturing, or harassing sea turtles is prohibited.

In 2005 the many agencies that have jurisdiction over the turtles (NOAA, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, the Department of Land and Natural Resources, and the City and County of Honolulu) collaborated on new wildlife viewing guidelines for the honu. These include staying six feet away from sea turtles and not touching them, always allowing them a clear access to deep water, and, when on the beach, disposing of trash properly. Honu mistakenly eating trash can incur serious injuries or death. Feeding the turtles alters their natural behavior and distracts young honu from learning survival skills. Harassing wildlife interferes with their natural functions of feeding, breeding, and resting.

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The local residents of the Haleiwa and Sunset Beach areas have long used Laniakea for fishing, surfing, snorkeling, and swimming with the honu. As the turtles proliferated, local behavior developed into swimming with and feeding the friendly honu, and bringing friends and family to see them. In 2003 the large, mature turtles (150-250 pounds) began basking regularly at Laniakea, and the tours and tourists began flocking to this beach.

In 2004 international travel increased by 10% mainly due to the availability of low cost air travel. Ecotourism, nature-based, pro-poor, responsible, and sustainable ethical tourism, and adventure travel trips are currently the most popular (Wagner 2005). In 2005 a record 7.4 million people will visit Hawaii. Sixty percent of these tourist listed they would like to have at least one nature-based experience (Cataluna 2005). In recent study of values among wildlife viewers, viewing scenery, enjoying nature, and observing and learning about wildlife behavior scored the highest among several alternatives (Daigle 2002).

As the numbers of visitors increased at Laniakea so did the interaction problems with the honu. Because of being fed and touched the turtles' behavior changed, and they began begging, bumping, and biting people. Honu have strong beaks with serrated upper jaws (Gulko 2005), and

In the summer of 2005 two children were bit, also (JM6)
a young adult female was nipped in the thigh (personal communications John
Angel, Sept. 2005) I personally was firmly bumped and begged from a large
honu in May 2005. Also numerous harassment incidences were reported to
the many official agencies.

The popularity of the honu has created traffic problems. Residents
are experiencing long delays as they commute to work and school. Tourists
are randomly crossing the busy two lane Kamehameha highway. This has
caused an increase in road rage, traffic accidents, and injuries. Emergency
services are slowed down in this area. Other problems include safety and
sanitation issues. There are no lifeguards at this beach, and ocean related
mishaps and injuries are daily events. There are no bathrooms at this beach.
The closest public bathrooms are two miles away.

The popularity of the honu's unique basking behavior raises many
questions about the ethics of ecotourism and wildlife viewing. The *Earth
Island Journal* stated that ecotourism should promote environmental
awareness, conservation of natural resources, encourage sustainable
development, and alleviate poverty in the geographical area it utilizes (Amaro
1999). A current tourism science article defines ecotourism as bringing
access to natural and cultural resource and learning about and participating

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in environmentally friendly low impact activities, such as wildlife viewing, and photography (Jamal 2002). John Tribe's 2002 paper blends and introduces ethical tourist education with virtue ethic to learn what is good in tourism from Aristotle's idea of *phronesis* (wisdom) and being aware of the *telos* or purpose of tourism and good tourism behavior. Judith Stark defines ecotourism as "...an enlightening nature travel experience that contributes to conservation of the ecosystem while respecting the integrity of the host communities" (2002:109). She examines the problems associated with adventure travel such as public access, impacts on fragile ecosystems with limited resources, religious restrictions and cultural values of the resources, and the possibility of objectification of the local culture. In poor communities the fair distribution of fees and employment opportunities should be monitored, and most importantly the preservation of the esthetics and intrinsic value of the resource and sustainability for future generations (Starks 2002).

In an interesting and passionate paper regarding wildlife utilization and ethics South African T.M. Crowe suggests that a person's ethical perspective is determined by their culture and not necessarily by objective facts. He assigns individuals wildlife viewing attitudes broadly on the basis of

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whether they live in the northern or southern hemispheres. He states that wealthy northerners are "...brainwashed by Walt Disney", and they believe animals have inherent rights and their ecological areas should be protected and controlled by bureaucracies. In contrast the poor southerners want to utilize wildlife as life sustaining resources. He notes with the rise of ecotourism, especially in Africa, many jobs are being created related to wildlife viewing. He believes scientists, educators, economists, and politicians need to educate the indigenous public about the long term benefits of ethical sustainable wildlife use (Crowe 1995).

After guarding the turtles at Laniakea for many hours and days during my internship with NOAA and witnessing 100's of tourists and residents of various nationalities and cultures watching and photographing the honu, I have come to a personal opinion and conclusion that it is personality type and not age, gender or culture that determines one's attitude and behavior toward wildlife. Young aggressive boys and girls will approach the turtles as close as their parents will allow while shy children will hide behind the adults. Cautious teenagers will observe the red ropes and notice the signs while aggressive teens will run up and poke at the basking honu or

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chase them around in the water until they can touch them. Eager adults also rush up to the turtles oblivious to, or ignoring the ropes, while more observant, cautious people approach the new area and situation more scientifically, reading the signs and acknowledging the naturalist or biologist present. A summation of my observations of the visitors would be 75% respectful and 25% not respectful. Japanese women are noticeably the most verbally and physically demonstrative when they see the honu. They usually scream and jump up and down and need to be alerted and informed of the viewing guidelines.

What are the solutions for the honu, residents, and tourist at Laniakea Beach? Mahatma Ghandi said, "The greatness of a nation and it's moral progress can be determined by the way it's animals are treated." NOAA's Balazs began a marine turtle research program called Honulani in June 2005. Everyday he or his staff, interns, and volunteers are on the beach to protect the basking honu and educate the community, tourists, and the tour industry employees about the turtles and turtle viewing etiquette. Local residents have established a community task force, and they are discussing short and long term solutions for the safety and traffic problems, such as crosswalks, tour bus parking, over-passes, and highway realignment.

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Many residents favor developing the area into a park with lifeguards and bathroom facilities.

In my opinion the research program, myself included, needs to reach out to North Shore individuals, community, and school groups to recruit more volunteers to guard the honu and educate the visitors to Laniakea Beach, especially on weekends during the busy afternoon hours when the turtles are regularly basking. Most of the adjacent residents are of various ethnic backgrounds and are educated and of upper and middle class socio-economic status. They respect the honu and are willing to make concessions regarding all the associated honu problems. Some local Hawaiians insist on their indigenous rights to feed and harvest the turtles. I believe having someone at the beach is the best solution and more reasonable than fencing off or closing the beach - D.L.N.R. proposed solution (personal communication Roger Kincaid, Sept. 2005). Everyone should be able to see and appreciate our unique Hawaiian green sea turtles.

In the Honulani visitors log, stationed on the beach this summer, 90% of the comments were positive regarding honu viewing experiences. Most of the negative comments were from local residents who think the tour buses should be prohibited from visiting the beach, some of the negative

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comments included the following: "keep it natural and take the bureaucracy back to town" and "stupid white people touching the turtles --- NO RESPECT!"

Most of the comments said thing like, "beautiful", "wonderful", "amazing", "awesome creatures of the sea", "loved the turtles and the beautiful beach", "the beauty of the world in the eyes of this animal", and "Angels of the sea." Also most of the comments were thank yous' for protecting the honu such as "God bless the turtles, and God bless you!"

My experience at Laniakea Beach with the honu, residents, and tourist has been an educational and rewarding experience. I urge everyone to visit the Honu at Laniakea Beach.

Aloha,

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