

Ocean Watch

Monday, September 20, 1999

Oahu beach is prime spot for sea turtles

LAST week, I had one of the best Hawaii wildlife experiences I have ever had in the main islands.

I took my family to a North Shore beach near Laniakea to check out some sea turtles. Lately, I had heard, several self-assured greens have been coming to the shoreline in that area to graze. Beach-goers have been hand-feeding seaweed to the turtles, which are so tame they allow people to pet them.

Even though I knew this story before I arrived, I was still unprepared for the remarkable scene I found at this beach. Did I say several turtles? With little effort, my sister and I counted 42 individuals near the shoreline. In deeper water, the outlines of dozens more darkened the water.

Some turtles were big, some were small and some were in-between. All, however, had one thing in common: They had no fear of people.

In one area of the beach, spear-fishermen picked their way over seaweed-covered rocks to get to deep water, stepping over and around turtles in the process. The turtles just went on grazing.

In a nearby sandy place, people snorkeled with turtles, occasionally reaching out to stroke a shell or touch a flipper. The turtles did not flee.

And just feet from the beach, at least three 400-pound turtles accepted seaweed offerings from admiring humans. In the turtles' eagerness to eat, they even bumped and brushed our legs.

EVERYONE was having a wonderful time. As I stood in waist-deep water watching turtles swirl around me, a man from England asked if there were other places in Hawaii where the turtles were so tame.

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"I don't know but I hope so," I told him. "It's the reward we get for protecting our turtles for the last 20 years."

A Japanese woman, spotting dozens of turtles grazing at the shoreline, shrieked with delight.

"You can snorkel with them here," I told her, when I saw her pacing up and down near the slick rocks.

"Really?" she asked. "It is OK?"

"Yes. Just don't bother them."

Soon this novice snorkeler was swimming between two huge turtles, a scene I found amazingly gratifying.

There was, however, one brief moment of trouble during that otherwise perfect day. With great dismay, I watched a boy and girl, about 10 and 12 years old, sit down hard on the back of one of the big, near-shore turtles. Apparently, the kids were trying to see if they could pin the animal in place.

There were no adults with these kids (I had seen a woman drop the kids and leave) so I scolded them roundly myself. The children leaped off the turtle and hurried down the beach, clearly embarrassed by the reprimand. Thereafter, the children treated the turtles with respect.

Since I first heard about this turtle-feeding-and-petting phenomenon, I have worried that this sort of abuse would occur. Now I believe that most people visiting there simply won't allow it. If I hadn't admonished the kids, I'm sure someone else would have.

Turtle lovers won't stand by and watch these gentle creatures be harassed.

Right now, this stretch of North Shore beach is one of Hawaii's premier nature-viewing spots. Hopefully, the turtles will continue going there and the state will make the place a marine sanctuary and beach park, including much-needed signs about Hawaii's sea turtles.

In the meantime, don't miss visiting this fantastic place. And if you see someone behaving poorly around the turtles, please ask them to stop.