



Healthy turtles often bask in human company

A year and a half ago, I wrote about some large sea turtles that were regularly hanging around the shoreline at a North Shore beach near Laniakea. The turtles come there to eat the abundant seaweed growing on the rocks.

This seaweed-munching is typical of green turtles because seaweed makes up most of their diet. What is not typical is the fact that this turtle grazing area is often loaded with people. There are snorkelers, waders and anglers in the water and sunbathers, picnickers and beachcombers on the sand. The turtles, however, as long as they're left alone, are willing to share.

Now these turtles have taken their affability a step further. At least two of the big ones are routinely crawling onto the area's sand beach to sleep in the sun.

This is normal behavior for Hawaii's turtles. Although most of the world's sea turtles come ashore only to lay eggs, our greens also come ashore to rest.

In the past, these haul-outs took place in the tiny, remote islets of Hawaii's northwest chain. But as our turtles become more trusting of people, they are coming more to human-inhabited places.

Turtles currently rest on the sand at Punaluu and Puako on the Big Island and forage in bays full of snorkelers such as Hanauma Bay, Kau and Kona's Kahaluu Beach Park. Now Oahu's North Shore has a few sunbathers, too.

Federal biologists aren't sure what this turtle sociability on Oahu means. At first, workers worried that the turtles hauling out had tumors or some other malady. So far, however, they appear healthy. Apparently, these animals simply want to rest at that particular spot and don't mind human company.

This is good and bad. It's wonderful that some turtles have learned to trust humans; it shows the merit of protecting wild animals. But turtle biologists

are concerned that people will think these relaxing turtles are in trouble. Sometimes, well-meaning people throw water on beached turtles or try to drag them back into the ocean. Other times, people call the wildlife hot line and insist someone come and "rescue" a healthy basking turtle.

Some turtles beached on Oahu's North Shore certainly are in trouble. Distinguishing which phone calls are about stranded or sick turtles and which ones are about healthy, snoozing ones is a new problem for Oahu's wildlife workers.

The first step in helping our healthy, dozing turtles is informing others of this normal behavior. Besides word of mouth, signs have been erected at the Laniakea site reminding people that turtles are a protected species. Another sign explaining basking behavior is on the way. Here are some other things that can help Hawaii's turtles:

>> Remind people that it's not only cruel, but violates both federal and state laws to tug, sit upon, ride or hold turtles up for pictures. (One of these things has occurred each time I visited the North Shore site.)

>> Before calling authorities about a beached turtle, look for tumors, injuries or some form of entanglement. Tell the official what specifically seems to be wrong with the animal.

>> Keep this phone number, 983-5730, and call it for sea turtle (not whale or seal) strandings. For off hours, follow instructions on the recording.

To visit these remarkable turtles, go to Haleiwa. Drive about one mile out of town to where the ocean meets the road. Park at the large gravel pullout on the right. Cross the road carefully (the traffic there is terrible), and enjoy sharing the beach and bay with these remarkable animals.