

## ROADSIDE ATTRACTION DRAWING CROWDS



REBECCA BREYER | The Honolulu Advertiser

Toshiaki Koshimizu, a visitor from Japan, says hello to a sea turtle on Laniākea Beach yesterday afternoon. The turtles basking on the

beach are drawing big crowds of tourists, and neighborhood residents are unhappy with the traffic jams that result.

# Turtle jams trouble North Shore

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**HALEIWA** — North Shore residents say a recent phenomenon at Laniākea Beach, or “Turtle Beach” — namely hordes of gawkers stopping to snap photos of 200-pound sea turtles basking on the white sand — has created

a dangerous traffic bottleneck.

Pedestrians dashing back and forth on narrow, two-lane Kamehameha Highway next to the beach compete with irate, slow-moving motorists, and there is no crosswalk or sufficient parking area across from the beach.

The North Shore Neighborhood sub-committee held a

meeting last night to address traffic solutions.

“I watch this day after day after day,” said house painter Keith Adams, who has seen it all from his perch between the highway and the beach, where he has been painting a two-story home. Adams described the scene as a “new Waikiki.”

In Hawai‘i, green sea turtles, or honu in Hawaiian, are a threatened species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. People aren’t supposed to feed, touch, crowd, or tease them, but it happens.

Residents of Pohaku Loa Way,

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# Turtles

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a private street that connects with Kamehameha Highway where people have parked to see the turtles, have complained that traffic backs up so badly they cannot get out.

"(There should be) a designated parking area," said Hale'iwa resident Joanne Pettigrew, who lives right next to the popular turtle basking area and said she planned to attend last night's meeting. "But there's also the hazard factor for pedestrians with no crosswalk."

Adams said a constant, afternoon crowd of onlookers and photo snappers stop and make the dash across the highway.

"I saw a car hit a guy and drag him all the way from one side of the road to the other," Adams said. "Two police officers were standing there watching. The guy was later taken away in an ambulance."

The appearance of the turtles on the North Shore beach is nothing new — George Balazs, a turtle researcher with the Na-

tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said they've been basking there since 1999. He believes they began to come ashore after their protected status led to a rise in population. The difference now is that the word has gotten out to various tour groups, which deposit tourists directly out of their vans onto the side of the highway.

North Shore lifeguards say the daily traffic snarl at Laniākea presents an ongoing safety hazard that grows to nightmare proportions on weekends.

What should take from 5 to 10 minutes — to get from Hale'iwa to Waimea Bay — takes from 45 minutes to an hour, they say.

"It's worse now than it's ever been," said veteran North Shore lifeguard Lt. Pat Kelly. "(The traffic) limits our ability to patrol between Waimea Bay and Hale'iwa, (because) that whole stretch, of about four and a half miles, we patrol with our trucks."

Balazs watched about 30 observers yesterday afternoon who inquisitively crowded around two large turtles. He liked the fact they had come out to appreciate nature, and fielded questions about the turtles' behavior, diet, and mating patterns while

he measured the shell of one dubbed Scallop. There are about 20 turtles who favor the waters off Laniākea, he said, but usually around two are on the beach at any given time. Pamphlets provide information for adults and children.

"Clearly, these people went out of their way to see a sea turtle," Balazs said.

A woman with "Hang Loose" written on the back of her yellow shorts hurriedly approached the turtles and immediately started taking pictures.

"Oh, my God," exclaimed Kris Schwartz of Rapid City, S.D. "I've never seen anything like this."

Although "Do Not Touch the Turtles" signs dot the beach, some visitors can't resist.

Cori Wilbanks, a marine turtle biotechnician with NOAA, was doing her best to prevent people from touching them. She said some people were feeding the turtles, which is dangerous because they begin to associate people with food.

"We're trying to get that un-

der control," Wilbanks said. "A lot of people are getting bit. So many little kids have gotten bloody fingers."

She said about 80 percent of people comply — the rest require some persuasion.

"No, don't touch the turtles," she said good-naturedly to two people who knelt to pat one of them. Three large yellow, red and blue signs behind the two women read, "Show Turtles, Aloha — Do Not Feed, Handle, Crowd or Tease."

Adams said he saw a person sit on a turtle while it basked.

Author Audrey Sutherland, who lives down the street, favors restricted access to the turtles. "I think they're amazing animals," said Sutherland, who's lived in Hale'iwa for 50 years. "But there needs to be a more permanent solution, like a fence across in front of the turtles."

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