

Humans Help Way Of Life F

By KERRY MILLER

For 10 years Malama Na Honu has protected Hawaiian green sea turtles and educated locals and tourists about them from its North Shore beachhead.

Malama Na Honu means "care for the turtles," and that's just what the nonprofit has done with 60-plus volunteers. Outreach coordinator Joanne Pettigrew said volunteers are on the beach daily in three or four shifts lasting three to four hours apiece.

"We try to keep it enjoyable because they are volunteers," explained the Haleiwa resident. "We also do fundraisers and give incentive pins for every 100 hours on the beach. We have a wonderful, wonderful group of volunteers. We're so happy to have them here."

They report at 9:30 a.m. to the Laniakea site, and the last ones don't leave until sunset. When a turtle comes to bask on the beach, they rope off the area and put up signs alerting visitors not to invade that space. People can take photos and watch them, but they must stay outside the rope. In addition to answering questions and enforcing rules, volunteers also gather details for the federal government called "basking data."

"We have 25 turtles that have been identified over the last 10 years, and we have names for all of them. We send this in to the Marine Turtle Research Program," said Pettigrew. Turtles that bask at Laniakea are identified through a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag, or microchip. Volunteers wave a special hand-held scanner over the turtle to see which one it is. Using their records, they can then search the turtle's history to see the last time it paid a visit. From February until May 1, Hawaiian green sea turtles migrate to the French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to mate and rest. That's 1,000 miles round trip. When it's time, they'll be epoxied with a satellite tag so their travels can be tracked.

"This time of year, for them to be here for such a long time is a clue to me that they may be storing up their energy to migrate. At the end of the month, George Balazs, the leader of the MTRP, will come out to affix satellite tags to three of our turtles. We can get the satellite readings every 48 hours, and we're actually able to track them on the computer. Two of ours migrated last season," she recalled. "It was very neat to see."

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A renowned honu expert and researcher, Balazs noticed 10 years ago that the turtles were basking at Laniakea. Along with Pettigrew, who used to live next to the beach, he began outreach work and eventually founded Show Turtles Aloha, now Malama Na Honu.

"George and I, we started very slowly doing outreach because people were feeding them, riding them, picking them up, trying to put cigarettes in their beaks," she recalled.

The state DLNR, NOAA, local law enforcement, North Shore Chamber of Commerce, the Hawaii Tourism Authority and others support it. The group also works with schools and organizations. Go to www.malamanahonu.org.