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HONOLULU LITE

Charles Memminger

Why don't turtles cross the road?

**N**ORTH Shore resident Gordon Tilley writes: Charles, a new addition to our North Shore traffic crawl is a newly discovered turtle crossing. Where Lani's (Laniakea) was always a bottleneck during surf season, it's now a perpetual stoplight because of turtles. Now called Turtle Beach, (its) turtles are seeking revenge for our previous years of turtle steak and soup consumption and what better way to punish the local population than traffic jams."

I got excited when I read this note because I thought Gordon was saying that turtles were actually waddling across Kamehameha Highway. That would have given me the chance to ask the exceedingly obvious question, Why did the turtle cross the road?

But it turns out that the turtles are simply hauling out on the beach near the highway at Laniakea, the first major surfing spot you see going north from Haleiwa. Cars and buses have always slowed down there because you get a great view of the waves and surfers without leaving your vehicle.

But now the traffic jam at Lani's is even worse, and for that, I discovered, you can blame "Brutus."

WHEN writing about anything turtle, I consult "Honolulu Lite's" official turtle expert, George Balazs, a turtle biologist working in Hawaii since 1972, currently with the National Marine Fisheries Service. Balazs is so familiar with the turtles at Laniakea that he knows the exact turtle that first shuffled onto the sand to sun there: Brutus, a green sea turtle named by a lady who has lived at that beach for 30 years.

It was 1999 when the turtles first started basking at Lani's, George said. And it's weird because until that time, they stayed away from humans. Since almost being wiped out by both ocean predators (i.e., sharks) and land predators (i.e., us), green sea turtles have been a protected species, and their numbers have grown.

"We can't prove it," Balazs said, "but they may be recognizing people as no longer their mortal enemies."

There are about 15 turtles that regularly hang out at Lani's, while another 10 or so sun near Haleiwa Beach Park. On the Kona Coast, it's not unusual to see up to 100 turtles basking on the beaches, something until recently they only dared do in the extreme Northwest Hawaiian Islands.

Nowadays, most people see green sea turtles as "adorable" rather than "tasty," which is why everyone slows down to look at them in their cars. (The people are in cars, not the turtles.)

The fact that the turtles have chosen such a busy beach — humanwise — to sun "flies in the face of deductive reasoning," Balazs said. The turtles are protected by state and federal law from being "taken or harassed," but so far nobody on the beach seems interested in doing either to them. A kid playing around accidentally tripped over one of the turtles once, but he wasn't arrested, imprisoned or anything.

The situation at Lani's "turns out to be a very positive experience for the turtles and the people on the beach," Balazs said. "The traffic? Well, that's a different story."

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