

Jan 5 2011

Turtle photo stirs readers

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A photograph that appeared on the front page of Friday's Tribune-Herald of a 6-year-old boy caressing and crooning to a basking green sea turtle has stirred controversy.

Numerous letters to the editor and online comments about the photo by William Ing, titled "Turtle love," criticized the boy for touching the honu, the boy's

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parents for allowing it to happen, and the Tribune-Herald for publishing the image.

The Hawaiian green sea turtle is considered a "threatened" species under the federal Endangered Species Act, a designation less critical than "endangered." The aquatic reptile is also protected under state law. Those facts weren't mentioned in the photo's caption.

"It's illegal for anyone to harass a turtle, to feed a turtle, to catch a turtle, to harvest a turtle," James Weller, an enforcement officer for the state Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement in Hilo, said Tuesday.

He would not comment on whether the photo documented an illegal act, noting no law-enforcement officers were there to witness the incident.

"If you stood there and looked at the turtle, that wouldn't be harassment. The second you initiate a response ... some kind of response other than what it was normally doing there, that would be considered harassment," Weller said. He said that could include touching or making loud noises.

Under state law, a first incident of harassing a green sea turtle carries penalties of up to a year in jail or a \$250 fine, and that federal law provides for a year in jail and a fine of \$25,000 per violation, up to \$50,000,

Weller said.

There's no federal or state law that establishes a minimum distance that must be maintained between people and turtles.

George Balazs, a sea turtle scientist with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in Honolulu, said that green sea turtles are "on their way to recovery in Hawaii, but haven't recovered yet."

He said that green sea turtles basking on the beach is a common occurrence in Hawaii. The creatures are cold-blooded, and lie on the beach or on rocks to warm up, which helps their digestion, Balazs said. There are other reasons for basking that scientists are still attempting to understand, he said.

Balazs said that touching a green sea turtle, or any wild animal, is "ill-advised."

"It could disturb the animals," he said. "... Touching, getting too close, harassing and messing with them — even if it's unintentional — is very ill-advised because it interferes with the normal biology of the animal."

Balazs said the boy's action was probably spurred by schools and television "educating people about the wonder and amazement of sea turtles." He added that people need to be educated about why they shouldn't touch the turtles or other wild animals.

"A 6-year-old is a 6-year-old, and children will be children," he said. "I'm very glad to hear that in this case, it appeared that the turtle didn't bolt away — but that doesn't mean that it's OK to do it again."

Asked about the possibility of a human transmitting a disease to a turtle, Balazs replied: "Zero. None."

"There is a fallacy going around that people touching a turtle will somehow transfer disease to it, or weaken the skin or the immune system, or even give the turtle a herpes virus," Balazs said.

"There are other good reasons for not touching the turtle, other than making up fantasies about them," he added. "We had a problem a few years ago ... where people were feeding grass and weeds to the turtles at Carlsmith (Beach) Park. And some of the turtles were nipping at the people, because they equated food with people. ... The point is, yes, sea turtles can and have bitten people."

Deborah Ward, spokeswoman for the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, said the recommended distance for observation of sea turtles in the wild is 50 yards.

"We want people to remember that attempting to feed, touch or ride them could cause distress to the turtle. That's our key concern," she said.

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