

# Life improving for Hawaii turtles



PETER BENNETT/ URSULA KEUPER-BENNETT photo

**Photographers Peter Bennett and Ursula Keuper-Bennett** recorded a nesting effort by turtle 5690, the Maui Girl who was collected along with 229 others in 1980, raised at Sea Life Park on Oahu and released at various points around the main islands. The nesting on July 6 was her fifth of the season.

Admirers find evidence disease is regressing, while Maui Girl nests again

By **HARRY EAGAR**  
Staff Writer

LAHAINA — More than a decade of tracking and photographing the rare green sea turtles that make their homes in the waters off Maui is paying off for a Canadian couple spending summers here.

Peter Bennett and Ursula Keuper-Bennett had to wait around, shivering and hungry, for hours and hours to be godparents to a nest full of turtle eggs, complete with pictures taken last week of "Maui Girl," turtle 5690.

But the photographs that have caught the attention of turtle researchers are records of a turtle that was a victim of fibropapilloma tumors

11 years ago, but who was found this year to be nearly free of the grotesque growths.

"That's good news, and I'm not afraid to say it," says George Balazs, director of the Marine Turtle Research Program at the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center/Honolulu Laboratory of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

By documenting the recovery of the turtle that they've christened "Kimo," the Bennetts' excellent historical records, among the most complete anywhere, demonstrate a heartening regression of fibropapilloma disease, a mysterious ailment that 20 years ago was threatening to sweep through Hawaii's greatly reduced turtle population.

Pictures of Kimo that they took in 1993 show a sick turtle, with fist-size tumors around the head. A picture they took of Kimo earlier this year shows an older, wiser and much

See **TURTLES** on Page 04

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# Turtles

Continued from Page A1

healthier turtle, with just the barest nubs revealing where the tumors used to be.

Green sea turtles in Hawaii reached a low point in the mid-1970s. In those days, greens were still landed on the pier at Lahaina on their way to grills and soup bowls in West Maui restaurants, and the catch rate was rapidly overhauling the total population — although in those days nobody was sure what the total population was.

Even after hunting was banned in 1974, the population stayed low. A 30-year study published by Balazs and Milani Chaloupka last year showed that nesters on French Frigate Shoals, which is the main nesting site, were barely more than 100 a season 25 years ago.

Nestings fluctuate dramatically from year to year, for unknown reasons, and in some seasons there are no more nesters at French Frigate Shoals than there were around 1980. But in good years, there have been nearly 500.

Sea turtles are still nowhere near what they used to be. Maui Girl is the only green known to nest regularly on Maui; and the even rarer hawksbill turtles only occasionally dig a nest in South Maui.

Yet the fibropapilloma virus that affected so many turtles is regressing, at least in many areas; and Balazs, the chief researcher of sea turtles in Hawaii, says that the population trend is up.

Some of that population growth around the Main Hawaiian Islands is a result of a breeding program that led to the release of Maui Girl in September 1981 off Hilo. She showed up four years ago on the beach fronting the Lahaina Shores condominium to begin nesting and then showed up this summer.

The Bennetts were there to document the nesting and to learn in the process that nesting green sea turtles are single-minded, almost fanatical, and they are not in a hurry.

"No matter how fatigued and miserable we were, it could not compare to the ordeal 5690 was undergoing," they wrote about their latest encounter on their Web site, Turtle Trax, at [www.turtles.org](http://www.turtles.org).

The Bennetts, who live near Toronto and visit and dive on Maui



PETER BENNETT / URSULA KEUPER-BENNETT photos

Off Napili, a green sea turtle who had once been covered with fibropapilloma tumors around his face and neck (photo left) was found to have recovered from the virus infection (photo right). Named "Kimo" by photographers Peter Bennett and Ursula Keuper-Bennett, the turtle is concrete evidence that the disease can regress, says marine biologist George Balazs with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

every summer, have a splendid record of the local turtles, including this month, one of the most detailed up-close-and-personal accounts of how a determined green sea turtle ignores drunks, wandering homeless people, necking couples and — yes — amateur biologists to get her eggs in the sand.

The Bennetts' diary of one night watching her work shows how very tedious the egg-laying process is.

It takes so much energy that Maui Girl tries only every other year. In 2002, she dug seven nests in Lahaina, an excellent total. Balazs notes she started early this year, was already up to five nests by July 6, and may do eight before the season ends.

On the night of July 6, the Bennetts got a call from Mary Jane Grady, one of West Maui's other devoted turtle watchers, alerting them that Maui Girl was coming ashore around 9 p.m.

Turtles didn't get their reputation for being slow for nothing. Maui Girl probed around for a good spot for some time. The Bennetts stayed well back, because turtles are sensitive in the digging stage, but at one point a drunk nearly stepped on her head. Maui Girl ignored him.

With much flailing of flippers, Maui Girl finally dug in and completed a nest hole, big enough to take her 200-pound body. Then she abandoned it, apparently because there were too many roots.

She dug another complete nest. And abandoned that one, too.

Finally, third time was the

charm, she got one that suited her and went into her egg-laying trance shortly before 3 a.m.

Once the eggs start dropping, the mother turtle becomes oblivious to the rest of the world. That lasted 15 minutes.

Then she had to cover the nest, more flailing. Bennett says he was getting an appreciation for just how much work a female turtle has to do.

After a couple of hours, she was through and hit the water at 5:12 a.m. If she keeps to schedule, she'll probably return around Tuesday.

According to the Balazs and Chaloupka study, habitat destruction and human interference probably had as much to do with turtle decline as hunting. They infer that because of the long generational cycle — 25 to 35 years — and the fact that the rebound began before the anti-hunting law had had time to produce effects.

More likely, they wrote, the end of habitat destruction on French Frigate Shoals in the '50s probably started the Hawaii green sea turtle recovery.

Although there are plenty of likely looking nesting beaches, at least to a human eye, almost all nesting in the islands is at French Frigate Shoals.

Maui Girl digs her nests on a busy beach almost right under a resort hotel.

"She's definitely a different kind of turtle," says Bennett.

She also has a lot of friends in Lahaina. "The beach people are really protective of those nests," says Bennett. "They don't let anyone

bother them."

As for Kimo, the Bennetts have two pictures of him on their Web site, sick and well. "You can barely tell" Kimo was ever sick, says Balazs.

It's hard to keep track of a disease in wild animals, and Peter Bennett disclaims any expertise on fibropapilloma, but he says, "We do know there is more regression in that population (around Napili) than we had hoped for."

Balazs says, "He's underselling himself." By persisting with their annual expeditions to locate and document with photographs, he says, the Bennetts have shown that the virus is in retreat.

"They stuck with it," he said.

Whether the evidence off Maui can be translated to indicate what is happening worldwide is hard to tell. Few, if any, places have such long records of individual green sea turtles as Maui.

Headcounts tell a similar story. The NMFS biologists return to Molokai every couple of years, where they use a technique called "bullpenning" to count turtles.

By herding all an area's turtles into a confined area, without actually catching any of them, the counters can get a good idea of how many turtles are showing outward signs of fibropapilloma. (The tumors can be internal, in which case only a necropsy reveals them.)

In the mid-1980s, fibropapilloma attained plague proportions in south Molokai, and about 67 percent of turtles were infected.

In 2002, the figure was down to about 28 percent, Balazs says. He's hoping the next survey will show even less. It's what he hoped for but was not certain nature would provide.

Diseases can sweep through wild populations, but over time a natural immunity may build up.

With animals that breed as slowly as green sea turtles, that could take a long time, but it's been about half a century since the disease appeared in Hawaii.

The turtle reproduction process is slow in terms of both the lifetime effort and the efforts of a female on a warm summer night, as Maui Girl has demonstrated. But they are persistent.

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# Familiar turtle back on Maui

*The green sea turtle dubbed "Maui Girl" became known for her prolific nesting activity*

**By Diana Leone**  
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"Maui Girl" is back for her third season nesting on Lahaina beaches.

The 24-year-old green sea turtle is something of a celebrity among Lahaina residents and visitors for her prolific nesting activity in 2000 and 2002.

And she has a special place in the heart of George Balazs, leader of the Hawaii Marine Turtle Research Program, who released her as a yearling in 1981 off Hilo.

Maui Girl was among dozens of wild-born turtles raised to a year old at Oahu's Sea Life Park. They were then tagged and released. She is the only one that has been re-identified, thanks to a metal tag with the number "5690" that amazingly stayed attached to her right front flipper until just this year.

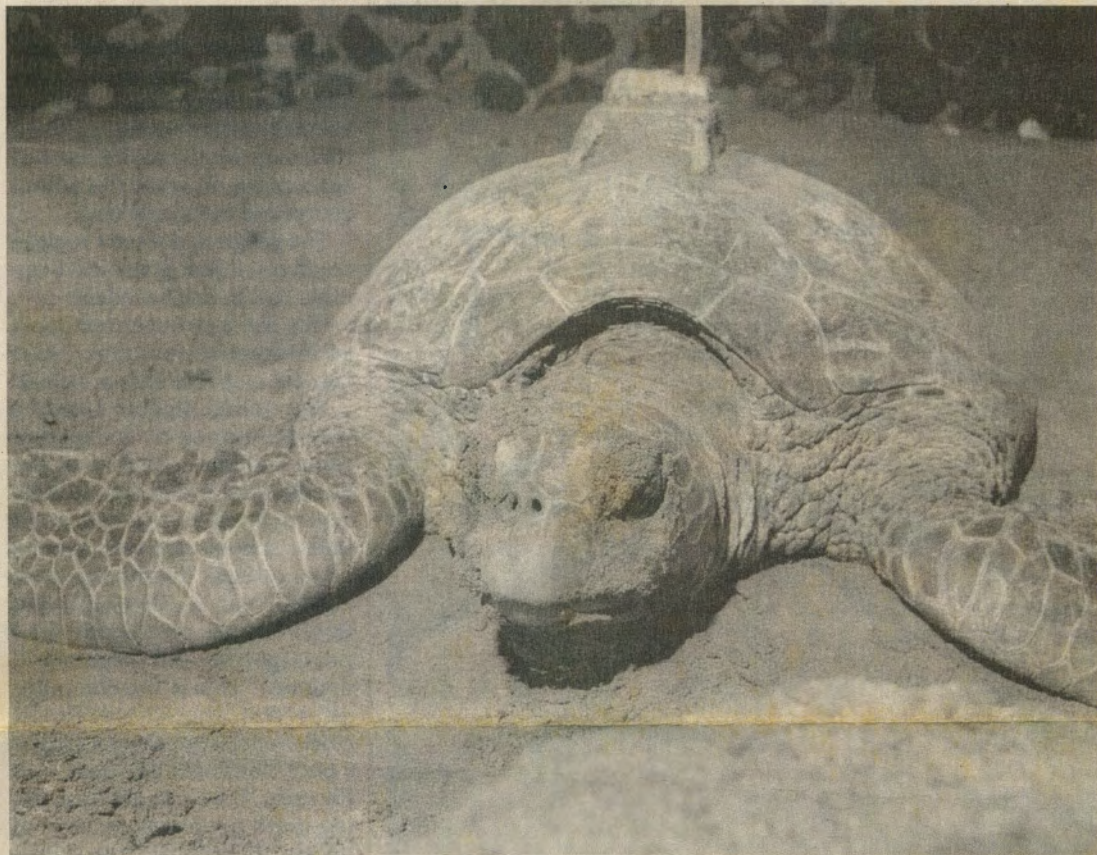
"I have fond memories of setting her free ... when she was just a yearling, a bit larger than the size of my hand and weighing only a few pounds," Balazs wrote to fellow scientists in an e-mail after he tracked her by satellite transmitter between July 2002 and April 2003.

"This is one of the most exciting, successful and rewarding sea turtle satellite trackings I've ever been involved in," Balazs said in 2003 after tracking Maui Girl's whereabouts along the West Maui Coast.

Balazs said that after the turtle completes three or four nesting cycles this year, she will be outfitted with a new, smaller satellite transmitter.

In the summer of 2002, Maui Girl laid seven nests of eggs in Lahaina, twice as many as the average female lays in a typical season. This summer, she was first spotted May 8, and again May 21 and 22.

From a yearling that weighed 6 or 7 pounds in 1981, Maui Girl has grown to a shell size of



URSULA KEUPER-BENNETT, NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

**The green sea turtle known as "Maui Girl" nests near Lahaina in 2002. The turtle has returned to beaches near Lahaina three times so far this year. Maui Girl was among dozens of wild-born turtles tagged and released at 1 year old in 1981 and is the first to have been recaptured and identified after laying eggs.**

more than 3 feet and an estimated weight of 200 pounds.

Though green sea turtles are year-round residents of the main Hawaiian Islands, no more than a handful nest here. Most nest every other year in the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

The turtles spend the majority of their time in the ocean, but mature females emerge onto sandy beaches on summer nights to lay one or more clutches of about 100 eggs. The eggs hatch about two months later, and the hatchlings have to make their own way to the ocean.

Saichi "Saik" Sasaki, 83, is just one of Maui Girl's many local admirers.

"Two weeks ago it came the first night (this year)," Sasaki said last Tuesday. "The dogs barked, so we went to see and the turtle was on the lawn."

However, instead of nesting adjacent to Sasaki's beachfront home, as she had in years past, Maui Girl chose a spot a couple of houses down from the nearby Lahaina Shore Hotel.

Sasaki helped state wildlife official Skippy Hau mark the nest so people will not accidentally trample it during its incubation period.

Once it is marked, Sasaki said the entire neighborhood, and even visitors, look out for a nest's welfare.

"People seem to understand and leave it alone," he said.

"I've lived here more than 50 years," Sasaki said. "All the years, we didn't have any (turtles nesting). It's funny to see that when they finally arrive, now it's pretty steady."

Balazs' research over three decades has shown that the population of green sea turtles in the Hawaiian Islands is

increasing.

Sasaki hopes there will be a hatching of turtles when his grandchildren visit in July.

The hatchlings, which weigh just a few ounces, leave "track marks all down the beach," he said.

"They take off for the ocean — they know where the sea is. It's very nice."

Green sea turtles are a threatened species in Hawaii and protected by state and federal laws.

A person found guilty of purposefully injuring a green sea turtle could face fines of up to \$5,000 per violation and administrative fees up to \$10,000.

If you think you see a turtle nesting on any island beach at night, do not disturb it, but do take note of the nest location and report it to Balazs on Oahu at 983-5733 or gbalazs@hnlab.nmfs.hawaii.edu.