

'Pretty Miraculous'

Rare green sea turtle that was set free 20 years ago comes back to Hawaii to produce crop on Maui shores

By HARRY EAGAR
Staff Writer

LAHAINA — Now that it's over — at least for this year — the story of Turtle 5690 is safe to tell.

She dug a nest on the beach, just a few feet from a big hotel, and successfully produced a crop of baby green sea turtles.

It was the first recorded nesting on Maui by an endangered green sea turtle. And not just any green sea turtle, but one that was banded and set free almost 20 years ago as a yearling the size of your hand.

"Pretty miraculous," says George Balazs, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program of the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu. Balazs was the man who set 5690 free on Sept. 11, 1981, at Richardson Ocean Center near Hilo.

Nobody had seen 5690 since, and nobody saw her come ashore the first time, in July.

But Jerry and Marian Bitnias of Kihei, faking their daily beach walk, spotted her tracks the next morning.

The Bitniases moved here from Michigan a year and a half ago, so they had no direct experience with sea turtles. But Jerry Bitnias says he reads a lot and watches nature programs. While other people around seemed indifferent, he recognized the signs immediately and got "very excited."

They discovered a few eggs on the surface, probably dropped by 5690 as she retreated, and reported them to the staff at Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge.

When Balazs got the report, those eggs had dried out and were no longer viable.

"Two things were in the back of my mind," he says.

"There never, ever has been a green sea turtle nesting" on the island of Maui. At least, there were none that scientists found out about, though old-timers have told Skippy Hau of the Department of Land and Natural Resources that green sea turtles nested in Lahaina more than 50 years ago.

As far as Balazs knew: Lanai, yes; Molokai, yes. Maui, no.

On the other hand, the eggs were far too large to be from a hawksbill turtle. These have nested at Kealia in recent years.

The other thing in the back of Balazs' mind was a report of a leatherback turtle at Maalaea many years ago.

While green sea turtles are common offshore — common enough that dive boats run tours to "Turtle Town" — for some reason they never nested here. Could the big eggs belong to the even rarer leatherback?

Balazs sent tissue samples from the eggs to California for genetic testing. But because so little development had



Photo above: Biologist Skippy Hau photographs a rescued baby turtle after it was dug up from its nest in a Lahaina beach. Hau and volunteer turtle baby sitter Mary Jane Grady (holding the turtle) found the baby among stragglers unable to dig their way out of the sand on their own.

Photo at left: The babies came from Turtle 5690, who was photographed as she went back to the ocean after her first nesting on a Lahaina beach. Paris Cabral, who was living near where 5690 dug her nest, took this picture. Getting this close to an endangered green sea turtle is not recommended, but turtle researcher George Balazs says that since 5690 was retreating this photo probably didn't bother her much. People taking photos or video of turtles trying to come ashore often drive them back into the water.

taken place, the test required, a tedious process of multiplying the genetic material to get enough to measure.

Confirmation came in a different way.

In August, Glynnis Nakai, refuge manager at Kealia, heard that a turtle had dug a nest in Lahaina. Furthermore, Paris Cabral had a picture of her

going back into the ocean.

Bud "The Birdman" Clifton, who lives at 465 Front St. (right next to Lahaina Shores) said he met 5690 when he was walking down to the beach to "look at the moon."

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Suddenly, somebody was throwing sand in his face.

It was 5690, digging furiously with her front flippers to create a nest for her eggs.

Neighbors rallied around. "Big Wave" Dave Warren set up some stakes and string to keep people from walking over the nest. (Nakai says that was unnecessary. The eggs are buried 18 inches deep and are pretty safe until the babies start digging their way out.)

The Hawai'i Wildlife Federation was called, and volunteer turtle babysitter Mary Jane Grady camped out in Clifton's backyard to keep watch.

Other watchers included Amy Miller, Imme Brueshaber and Matt Johnson.

Green sea turtles return every two weeks to deposit more eggs, usually close to the first nest. Grady, a graduate of Berkeley in conservation biology, had observed a hawksbill's nesting activity on the Big Island, and though she had not seen a green sea turtle nesting, she had observed them in the wild.

Nakai, who has studied green sea turtles nesting at French Frigate Shoals, says 5690 was a little less regular in her visits than other green sea turtles.

Grady says there were no problems. Though there were a lot of people and dogs on the beach at night, none interfered with the little turtles as they dug their way out and headed for water.

Neighbors cooperated by turning down their lights, which could have drawn the babies away from the sea.

Despite the high-rise hotel at her back, Grady says that sitting on a dark

beach, with just a starlit ocean, sand and breaking waves in front of her, she could feel the reverberations of 150 million years of evolution as she watched 5690 crawl up the beach.

(The Hawaiian islands have existed only 75 million years. Sea turtles were around long before that. And before there were people here, turtles knew Maui. Just last month, archaeologists from Xamanek Researches, digging in Paukukalo, found a complete skeleton of what appeared to be a green sea turtle in an undisturbed layer, older than the oldest human occupation of Maui.)

Last Sunday, after the last babies left on their own, Hau of the aquatic resources branch of the DLNR and the volunteers checked the nest.

Grady says they wanted to collect the shells for a census and study, and also to rescue stragglers.

It is a tough job for a tiny turtle to fight through inches of sand, and they have to help each other. Usually, a few get left behind or, as in this case, they can be trapped in roots.

Though turtles are protected and should not be disturbed, Hau has a permit to handle them, and he took pictures of one of the babies for use in lectures.

Number 5690 left clutches of approximately 77, 84 and 90 eggs on the Lahaina beach, and about 60 percent hatched.

Balazs says it was a good choice by 5690 to abandon Kealia, which, although near a protected refuge, is too dry for good nesting. The Kealia nest had an estimated 92 eggs, but only a dozen survived to hatch.

The busy Lahaina beach is moist. And everybody was respectful.

All marine turtles are protected. Unlike whales and Hawaiian monk seals, there is no set distance people are required to keep away, but Balazs says we should keep a "respectful" distance. Handling baby turtles, except with a permit, is a violation.

Hau says he likes to stress, "give space to the turtles." That includes photography. Turtles are dazzled by flash and video lights, and Hau gets complaints each year that people with cameras have chased turtles trying to come onto the beach back into the ocean.

But 5690 is one determined turtle, and her story is not merely unique. It is amazing and mysterious.

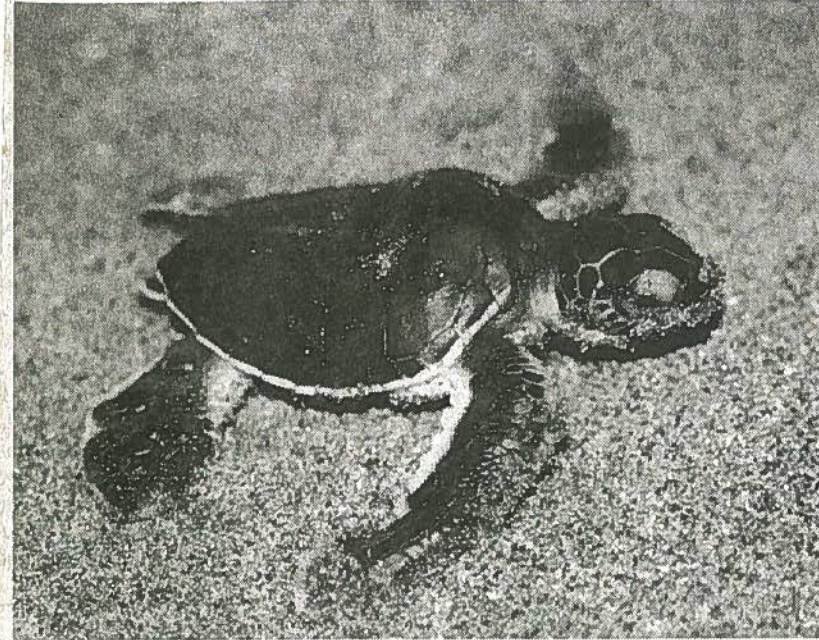
If she was going to lay eggs, she ought to have done it at her birthplace, Tern Island at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, where more than 90 percent of green sea turtles that nest in Hawaiian waters go.

But in 1980, Balazs and Bill Gillmartin of the National Marine Fisheries Service collected 230 hatchling sea turtles for an experiment.

They were trying to devise a way to track the turtles from a distance. Scientists tag turtles, but that means getting real close, or even handling them, to read the tags.

Gillmartin and Balazs had the idea of transplanting a bit of the baby turtle's plastron (the light-colored bottom shell) to the dark carapace. In theory, the light dot would be visible even in the water, and from its placement, the turtle could be identified.

It didn't work very well. After a year or so at Sea Life Park, Balazs let the survivors go.



A newly hatched baby green sea turtle rows its way through the sand to the ocean.

Photo courtesy of Mary Jane Grady

Nobody really knew — or knows now — which would be the best place to release them. So the researchers scattered them around. Some went back to their birthplace. Others were dropped in the water off McGregor Point, and off Oahu.

About 25 went in at Richardson, a couple of miles from Hilo. Number 5690 was then 22 centimeters (about 8 inches) long and weighed six pounds.

And that was the last anyone saw of most of them. One, appearing weak, was observed a few months later in the water near McGregor Point, but none was ever seen after that.

That the tag should still be intact after so long is against the odds, says Balazs. But Grady, without touching 5690, got a clear look at it, and it was shiny and legible.

Balazs says 5690 is "an unusual turtle." If she was going to reproduce, "she is supposed to be imprinted" on Tern Island.

It is thought that green sea turtles somehow remember their home beaches and return to them to nest. (Therefore, say turtle watchers Bitnias and Grady, 5690's babies should want to come back to Maui someday to lay eggs of their own.)

But perhaps, speculates Balazs, baby turtles need to swim offshore to become imprinted. And 5690 didn't swim out. She was lifted out of her nest.

Now she is a grown turtle. Nobody measured her, but Grady says she was probably about three feet long.

Balazs says that's about right because almost all nesting greens in Hawaii are at least 90 centimeters (three feet) long.

In any event, she picked Maui. And Balazs says, it would be "reasonable" to expect her to come back next year.