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THREE - FLIPPER TURTLE A SURVIVOR

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It goes about
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— Bo Blinski
who came across turtle
with three flippers

By **MELISSA TANJI**
Staff Writer

It's missing a flipper, but he (or perhaps she) makes up for it in heart.

A young green sea turtle, with only three flippers, has inspired Kihei ocean enthusiast Bo Blinski with its energy and its ability to overcome obstacles.

Blinski spotted the turtle he nicknamed Survivor about a year ago, as he was snorkeling in waters off South Maui.

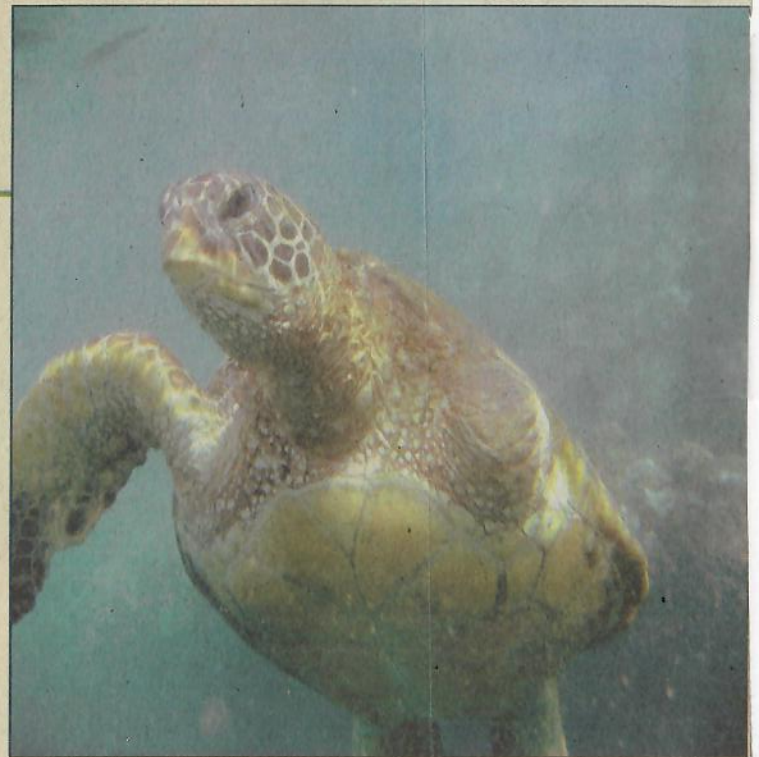
Since then, he has watched the animal swim, frolic and eat, all without apparent problems, although being a member of a threatened species is a handicap to begin with.

"He or she holds its own. . . . It's amazing," he said.

Blinski, a research volunteer for the Marine Turtle Research program on Oahu, said he's seen some turtles with only partial flippers but not one like this.

Researcher George Balazs, who heads the program on Oahu, said a turtle with three flippers is not uncommon.

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Three flipper

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"I wouldn't say it's not a rarity, (but) it's not an everyday occurrence."

Balazs said turtles could lose their flippers from shark attacks and even from becoming entangled in monofilament fishing lines.

Recently, a turtle from Oahu, which is being monitored with a tracking device, lost one of its front flippers, apparently from a shark attack. Still, it has reportedly laid its eggs at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Blinski said he hopes that Survivor's missing flipper is from birth rather than being a victim of a shark or a speeding boat.

The green sea turtles, or honu in Hawaiian, are listed as threatened.

According to the Humane Society of the United States' Web site, the green sea turtles were once found in the millions, but it is estimated that there are fewer than 200,000 nesting females worldwide. In Hawaii, it is illegal to hunt, injure, harass or capture sea turtles without a license. Besides human threats, the turtles are threatened by fibropapilloma, a contagious illness. The virus does not kill directly, but sometimes the tumors it causes can cause death by inhibiting life-sustaining activities.

The Pacific green turtle primarily nests in the French Frigate Shoals. Green sea turtles nest every two to three years and spend the years between nesting seasons preparing for their long trip from foraging to nesting grounds, which may be more than 1,000 miles apart, according to the Humane Society Web site.

Balazs said not having a flipper is not a death sentence for a turtle, but it could impact a male turtle more than a female.

He said the male turtle may not be a successful breeder as it needs at least both front flippers to hug the female on the back in order to mate.

"That's kind of bad news if you are a boy turtle," said Balazs, who heads the Marine Turtle Research program for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Serv-

ice, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center.

Humans cannot distinguish the boy turtles from the girls, at least when they are young.

For females, not having a hind flipper may increase the time she takes to dig her nest in the sand, as the hind flippers are used to reach down into the sand, Balazs said.

But overall, a turtle with three flippers will survive and will be able to swim like it had a full set of flippers.

Balazs said normally if the turtle were to stroke with only its one front flipper, the turtle would swim in a circle.

But he observed that the turtle would use the hind flipper on the same side as the missing front flipper and do a "flutter kick," or up and down motion, to make up for the missing flipper.

Blinski said he's not sure the sex of Survivor but says he or she is a younger turtle, maybe around 12 years old, judging from the size of its shell, which is about 14 inches long.

Blinski said he's seen older turtles with 40-inch-long shells.

Green sea turtles on the average measure 36 to 40 inches in length and weigh 300 pounds. Reproduction starts at around age 20 to 30 years. The turtles eat sea grasses and algae.

Blinski, who has been snorkeling for 18 years, said he has

developed an affinity for the honu, who swim right up to him.

"They know me, they like me, I'm friends with them," he said.

Blinski has documented his encounters and shared them with Balazs. Blinski said Balazs doesn't know why the turtles are attached to him.

"Survivor has come to me. I have some amazing pictures of her," he said.

Blinski, a sports professional at the Grand Wailea Resort Hotel & Spa and life coach, said he does not touch or feed the animals.

"I leave them alone. I let the turtle make what choice they are making," he said.

Over the years, Blinski said he's seen thousands of turtles, some more than once. He recognizes them by their shells or their particular actions.

In the past, Blinski assisted a turtle suffering from flatulence.

Blinski said he gave the three-flipper turtle the name Survivor, not only for its perseverance, but as a testament to the turtle species, which has been living in the oceans for millions of years.

"This one is putting a real accent on surviving," he said. "Just having that missing flipper. It goes about doing everything as is."

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