

The Aloha Spirit Can't Be Drowned - Experts: Native Hawaiians Will Adapt, But Turtles And Residents Of Smaller Pacific Islands May Flock To The Big Island

By Terrie Henderson

Wednesday, May 6, 2009 1:47 PM HST

It would take a lot more than three feet of water to drown the Hawaiian spirit.

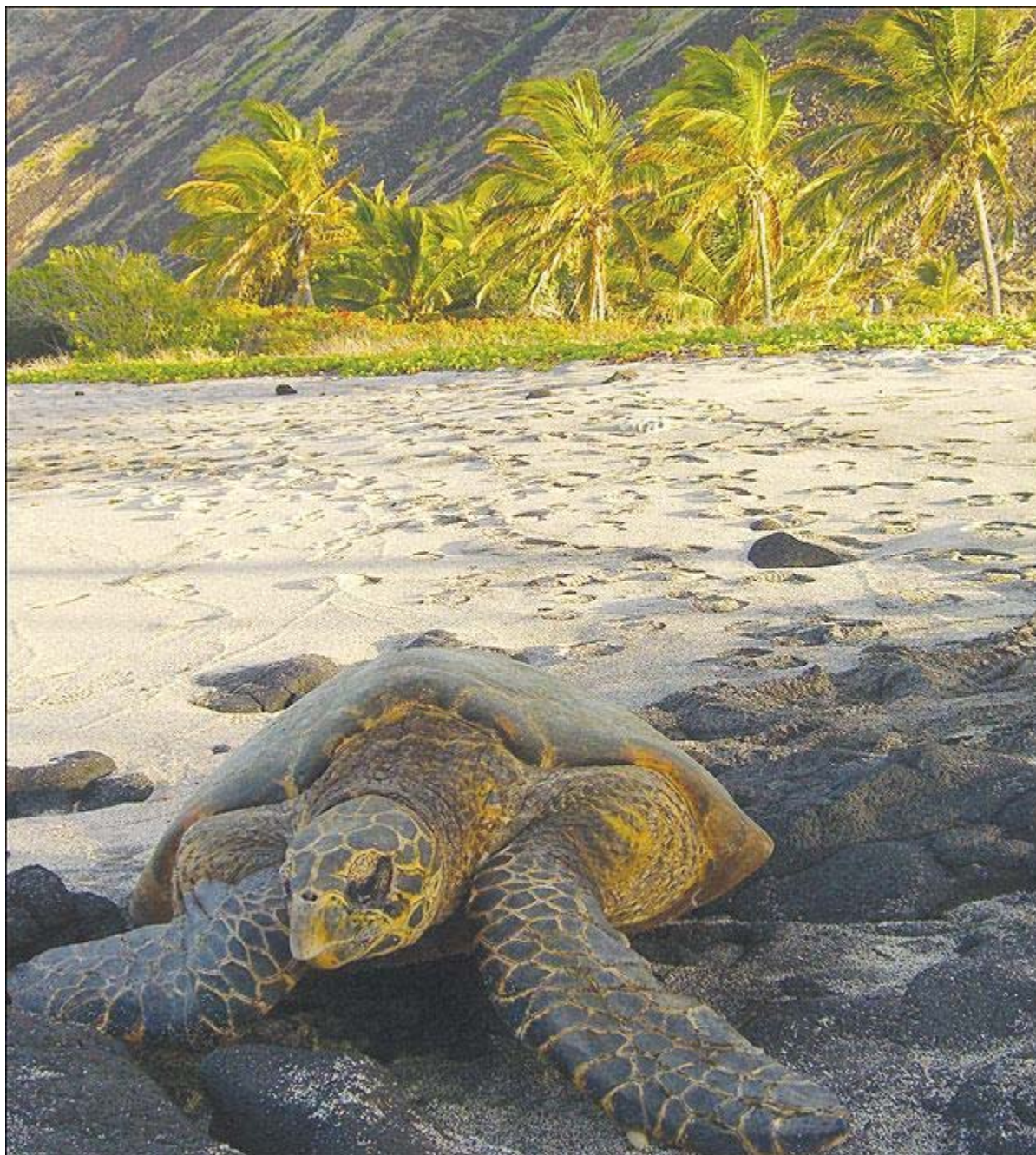
But that much water rise, which is expected to happen around the end of the century, will likely do much harm to the island's hawksbill turtle population, said Will Seitz, Hawai'i Island Hawksbill Turtle Recovery Project coordinator.

Life's a beach for the turtles

On Hawai'i Island, there are five to 15 nesting hawksbills annually. There have been 89 since 1991 that the project is aware of, Seitz said.

"They are very illusive," Seitz said, adding a favorite nesting beach for hawksbills is Kamehame Beach, three miles east of Punalu'u.

Already, Seitz said, high tides and south swells



Hawksbill turtle basking on the rocks at Halape. - Photo By Will Seitz

result in the loss of nests, because the beaches have limited space for turtles. The Big Island has miles and miles of cliffs and rocky shoreline. Beaches, for animals seeking rest, relaxation and places to start families, can be few and far between.

Nesting hawksbill turtles have not been seen at Punalu'u for about five years, he said, adding as the water rises, these endangered turtles will have fewer beach nesting spots available.

Also at risk when the waters rise are the green sea turtles, Seitz said. He said these turtles, the ones commonly seen basking around the Big Island, rarely nest in this island chain, although they have nested, at times on Maui and Kauai. The green sea turtles nest in the French Frigate Shoals, or the northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Green sea turtles, which are threatened, nest on islands that are barely above water



Hawksbill turtle hatchlings head to the waters of the Big Island after taking their first steps in their new world. - Photo By Will Seitz



Hawksbill turtle swims near some coral off the Big island - Photo By NOAA

now, Seitz said, adding their nesting grounds will become harder and harder to find as the waters rise.

But just as threatening for the hawksbill as sea level rise, Seitz said, will be trying to find food once the waters rise.

"Their primary food source are sponges in the coral reef," Seitz said, adding the rising water would likely cause destruction and degradation to the reefs.

"That would be a real serious blow to the hawksbill," Seitz said.

Seitz said Hawaiian monk seals would also likely be threatened by rising sea levels, because they, like the turtles, use beaches to rest and give birth.

Elsewhere in the Pacific

While Hawai'i Island will suffer, people living in Micronesia, where the majority of the land is very flat and usually not more than five feet above sea level, will face the possibility that their homelands will all but completely disappear under the vast, blue ocean.

Keola Downing, a Marshallese interpreter living on the Big Island, said if the waters rise, groups of people from Micronesia may need to move to Hawaii and elsewhere in the United States.

"I do think that there will be migrations from the Marshall Islands. I believe that there will be in excess of 40,000 Marshallese to the United States and most will come here," Downing said. "If the sea rise is three to five feet, there won't be much left to live on in the Marshall Islands. I have so much concern in that regard, that I will likely be spending my sunset years trying to address this real problem."

Downing said he does not want to see the culture of the Marshall Islands disappear.

"The only way to cause that to not happen is to introduce a special way of preserving their culture, language, and history into the largest remaining cluster of Marshallese people away from their homeland," Downing said. "It will almost surely be Hawai'i, and most likely be the Big Island itself."

The spirit of Hawaii

Some say the spirit of Hawaii will live on and thrive, although some parts of what is considered uniquely Hawaii today may become entombed in watery graves and remembered only with stories from the elders, photos and historic accounts.

George Applegate, executive director of the Hawai'i Island Visitor's Bureau, said he doesn't have the answer to how sea level rise will affect tourism 100 years from now, even though he acknowledged some popular beach areas will likely be at least partially under water.

"We will always promote what we have," Applegate said. "I don't think that is going to change."

Applegate said what really draws visitors to the Big Island is the aloha spirit.

"That's our No. 1 selling point," Applegate said, adding keeping mind and spirits positive and caring for the aina is of utmost importance.

He said the tourism industry needs to also encourage hotels to be environmentally friendly. Keeping Hawaii green will be an important factor to keep tourism, and the island, alive and well.

Kimo Pihana, Hawaiian cultural practitioner who many know for his work as a Mauna Kea Park Ranger, said he knows the sea level rise is undoubtedly a result of what people have done. But he said Native Hawaiians know how to rebuild and recover, and this water rise will not stop the Hawaiian spirit or culture from living on. He said Hawaiians have a way of praying, dancing, celebrating, singing and working very hard, which contributes to their survival as a people. Three feet of water won't drown that, he added.

"The islands know how to survive," he said. "The old culture will survive. The Native Hawaiians know how to get water, food. We don't need to go to Sack N' Save. We don't need to go to Wal-Mart. You can survive."

BIW investigates

This is the third of a three-part series on Big Island sea level rise over the next 100 years.

April 22 -- Big Island's beaches threatened by sea level rise

April 29 -- Big Island agriculture along the coasts will be hard hit.

Related story

"Marshall island memories." A Marshallese language interpreter, now living on the Big Island, talks about the islands and some of issues facing the Marshallese people.

Copyright © 2009 Big Island Weekly