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Maui book

Surgery saves sea turtle with tumor

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COURTESY NOAA PACIFIC ISLANDS FISHERIES SCIENCE CENTER

A male green sea turtle known as Heartbreak was returned to waters off Makena, Maui, after a medical team removed an 8½-pound tumor, seen above.

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Oriana Kalama said she noticed a green sea turtle with a huge tumor while diving in waters off Makena in south Maui about eight months ago and knew it would eventually die without help.

"I took pictures of it, thinking we need to bring this to the public's eye," she said.

Eight months later, the turtle who has been called Heartbreak returned to the water and his home Thursday after an 8½-pound tumor was removed during surgery.

Kalama, who had begun a

grass-roots group called Ocean Defender Hawaii about a year ago, said she posted the photographs of Heartbreak on her group's Facebook page last month, and the response was tremendous from her more than 32,000 followers.

"I got a lot of comment and a lot of attention," she said.

A medical team was dispatched May 12 after receiving a report that the turtle with a large tumor was sick and on the beach at Makena.

Kalama said she worked with University of Hawaii-Maui College lecturer Donna Brown, who was in contact with the medical team, and

federal sea turtle biologist George Balazs in Honolulu about helping Heartbreak.

Kalama said the sea turtle was skinny.

"He was sluggish," she said.

The turtle was flown to Honolulu, where veterinarian Dr. Robert Morris performed the successful surgery.

Balazs, who works at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, said the surgery to remove the tumor was only the second he's known in the past nine years in Hawaii.

He said some turtles have

multiple tumors that are inoperable because of their location and are euthanized.

But Heartbreak had a single tumor with a narrow stem attached to its head.

Balazs said he doesn't want to encourage people to rescue sea turtles.

Under federal law, Hawaiian green sea turtles are a threatened species and cannot be hunted, captured, or harassed.

Kalama said Heartbreak had a hole in his neck after the surgery but otherwise seemed well when he returned to the water.

"He was frisky," she said. "He seemed in really good spirits."

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