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KIRK AIDER / MAUNA LANI RESORT

**Big Island residents and visitors helped give eight green sea turtles a send-off yesterday at Mauna Lani Resort on the Big Island's Kohala Coast. The captive-bred turtles lived for two years in saltwater ponds at the resort.**

# Sea turtles' release thrills Big Isle crowd

By Diana Leone

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Eight green sea turtles raised in captivity were released into the wild yesterday off the Big Island's Kohala Coast as part of "Turtle Independence Day."

The 20- to 25-pound animals were bred and hatched at Oahu's Sea Life Park and raised for the past two years in saltwater ponds at Mauna Lani Resort, said George Balazs, the National Marine Fisheries Service turtle researcher who supervises the program.

The turtles were collected yesterday from the pools where they lived at the resort, checked for healthiness, then honored with speeches by dignitaries including U.S. Sen. Daniel Akaka and by hula dancers, Balazs said.

The animals were taken by decorated golf cart to the water's edge and released to cheers of an estimated 1,500 onlookers, Balazs said.

"We're having a wonderful turtle day," Balazs said. "Dozens of

children have seen the turtles."

Balazs knows that at least some of the turtles released in prior years are doing well, because they are still transmitting signals via satellite tracking tags. This year's group of turtles did not have satellite tracking devices, but they do have tags that will identify them if they are caught by researchers in the future, he said.

Balazs, recognized worldwide as an expert in green sea turtles, has a soft spot in his heart for the creatures.

"Last night, my wife and I were walking on the beach, and this young couple was getting married," Balazs said yesterday from the Big Island. "A wild turtle was sleeping on the beach, not too far from where they were getting married. I said, 'This is the way it's supposed to be — turtles and people living together.'"

Since the Mauna Lani started its turtle program, it has nurtured more than 100 juvenile honu in its ponds before releasing them into the ocean.