

Foreward for “A Time Apart”

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With admiration and respect for local island communities, I am honored to recommend "A Time Apart" to the readers of Marine Turtle Newsletter. The author of the article, who wishes to remain anonymous, is a native Hawaiian that has been my close friend for the past 32 years. The story he presents here offers a perspective not previously expressed in the pages of the Marine Turtle Newsletter. Indeed, not all readers will agree with the author's views. But all will, I hope, be inspired to give thoughtful consideration to his cultural insights and conviction. Questions that one might ponder include: How much research and information is really needed and enough to conserve sea turtles on a sustainable basis? In our seemingly

never ending curious quest for data and detail, is something being forsaken of our fundamental human acceptance of nature for the gift it really is?

These brief introductory comments have been written in my personal capacity as Regional Vice Co-Chair of the Oceania Region, IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group. I thank the Editors of Marine Turtle Newsletter for their continuing robust commitment to provide a forum for the exchange of diverse views.

"Sea turtles return in the dark of the night to escape notice. Ambiguity is their hallmark, and so should it be for those who are privileged with serendipitous rendezvous."- Author of A Time Apart.

A Time Apart

Anonymous

Ua ‘ea a ‘e ke loa ‘a ‘ole

“The ‘ea lives when it is not gotten.” (Anonymous)

We had never met, but our paths crossed many times before. Each year during the time known as *kau wela* to native Hawaiians she would announce her arrival with subtle imprints in the sand. Each year she would steal up from the night to lay her eggs amidst the dangling *pōhuehue* vines that outlined the crescent-shaped bay. And each year, for the past twenty years, I would make the long trip to the same remote beach for our annual rendezvous.

She was certainly not bashful when it came to saying hello. Again and again she would crawl from the bosom of the sea to deposit her clutches. Each day thereafter under the blazing sun, I would trace her meandering tracks to locate and count her nocturnal excavations. Some years our footprints would mingle as many as six or seven times. Her tracks, easily discernable in the morning sun, became less distinct as the day wore on. Each gust of wind softened her footprints with drifting sand. By day’s end only a concerted effort by knowing eyes could distinguish the traces of her nightly visits. Soon enough the relentless tradewinds and undulating tides would cover her tracks, leaving the beach a blank canvas ready to paint her next appearance.

Dutifully, we each would revisit the secluded beach over and over again. For three months at a time, our footprints would merge every 14 to 18 days until she was completely spent and returned no more. Her arduous mission completed, she would vanish to parts unknown until the next summer. My reprieve was never that long. Within weeks the leathery eggs she left behind transformed into miniature replicas of herself. At a predetermined time they would erupt *en masse* from their sandy cradles and dash frantically to the beckoning sea. At the water’s edge, the unrelenting waves pummeled them relentlessly. Paddling fiercely, the stronger ones make their way

past the shore breaks to relative safety. Their weaker siblings would not be so fortunate. They would be carried backwards and tossed onto a rocky promontory only to become wedged between boulders. If the tide was rising, there was still hope. A friendly wave might still carry them back out to sea. If the tide was ebbing, they were doomed. Not many stragglers would survive the blistering sun until the next swelling tide.

Those fateful strandings enabled me to identify their secretive mother as *ka ‘ea*, known to westerners as the hawksbill turtle because of the shape of its beaklike mouth. Revered throughout the Pacific, *ka ‘ea* is deeply embedded in our Hawaiian culture. For millennia its dark red meat provided much needed protein for our ancestors. Various other internal parts became essential medicinal ingredients for *lapa‘au* rituals. Numerous useful utensils such as combs, spoons, and dishes were commonly fashioned from its thick shell. Native fishermen found its carapace indispensable in making net needles, mesh gauges, and fishhooks. Its colorful serrated shell was also fabricated into ceremonial adornments such as bracelets and pendants. The role of *ka ‘ea* extended beyond the visceral and utilitarian needs of native Hawaiians. It also fulfilled a spiritual connection for the first people of these islands. In the ancient creation chant of the Hawaiian Islands the *Kumulipo*, it is *ka ‘ea* that was “born from the darkness of the night.” It was upon the back of *ka ‘ea* that mortals were transported from the “lower islands” to the “upper outer kingdom.” And it was *ka ‘ea* that guarded the ocean passage to the “kingdom of *Kuaihelani*,” the residence of our supernatural gods. So intimately linked are we that *ka ‘ea* is forever ingrained within our spiritual psyche, our genetic memory.

The hawksbill is one of several extant species of sea turtles found in the Hawaiian Islands. Markedly distinct from its larger cousin *ke honu*, the green sea turtle, they are nowhere as common. While green sea turtles abound in the shallow reefs around our Islands, hawksbills are seldom encountered. Twenty years of research as

a biologist have given me the opportunity to identify more than several thousand Hawaiian sea turtles with numbered tags. Of these encounters, only two were hawksbills. This rarity tugged at my curiosity and begged to be explored. To start, I considered that perhaps a satellite transmitter could be attached to my enigmatic partner. Linked with such a device I would be able to determine her whereabouts after leaving me to care for her offspring each year. My ploy determined, I readied myself for our annual rendezvous.

Counting the days between nesting episodes enabled me to predict subsequent visits with amazing accuracy. For several months as if on a schedule she arrived to perform her time-honored ritual. Each night she would plow across the beach until locating a suitable spot before carefully excavating a pit with her rear flippers. Painstakingly, she would deposit as many as 120 golf ball-sized spheres into a well-formed cavity. And then, as if following a prescribed script, she would inch forward and use her front flippers to disguise her nest by flailing sand backwards across her back. Once satisfied with her ruse, she would crawl back into the embracing sea from which she emerged an hour or so earlier. At last, after months of clandestine meetings she was almost completely spent. The time had come to execute my scheme. I carefully counted the last remaining days until her next visit and assembled my gear. After all these many years I would get to meet her face to face. Finally I'll get to know where she went after leaving me so abruptly each summer.

The *kulu* moon slipped in and out between dismal clouds. Distant flashes in the sky bode ominously. Through the drizzle I saw a dark break in the white ribbon of foam lapping the shoreline. Slowly at first, but with firm and decided motion she crawled onto the beach. With each ponderous stroke she moved farther and farther away from the protecting sea, the lambent moonlight imparting a glimmer off her still wet carapace. Only the occasional sound of flailing sand synchronized with laborious sighs interrupted the primordial stillness of the *hilu* night. It was as if time stopped and I had stepped back into another world.

She was beautiful! Vigorous and full of fight when I tried to stop her from returning to the sea. It didn't take long to realize that holding her in the box was not going to work. Reinforcement with ropes and rocks, stakes and tree branches, had all proved futile. She was too strong and too determined. Not to be outdone, I secured an old cargo net from some nearby flotsam. Weaving several pieces of tattered rope through the webbing, I created a bag. Another fierce struggle ensued, but I managed to guide her into my hastily improvised net. As an added measure I hung my pugnacious prize from a *hao* tree. Suspended several inches above the sandy beach her powerful flippers were completely neutralized. Decades of anonymity ended, we stared at each other in the silence of the night: I in wonderment, and she in anger for having her life's journey interrupted so unceremoniously.

After watching her dangle and being satisfied she was safely ensnared, I returned to camp to retrieve the transmitter. Barely fifteen minutes had passed, but I could not overcome the apprehension welling deep within my *na'au* as I hurried back to the beach. My heart sank as I saw my makeshift sack hanging limply in the air. She had dismantled several weathered strands, and that was enough for her to slip away. Thinking there was still enough time, I quickly located her tracks and followed them to the shore, but to my dismay I saw them disappearing into the surf. Too late!

In disbelief I stood there stunned, staring hopelessly at her truncated prints. Gradually the rain dripping on my face awakened my senses and made me realize she was actually safe and well. Eschewing my snare, she now swam unhindered in the sea where she belonged. Oddly enough, my disappointment was replaced with a sense of relief. It was as if a large weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Slowly but surely, the sound of lapping waves began to register in my mind. And then, just as surely, I heard my *tutu wahine's* voice (grandmother) speaking to me in the darkness of the night. "*O 'oe no ka maha'oi!*" she admonished me. Her words exactly from many years ago when I peppered her with questions about her life. "You are too nosey!" In the gloomy night, her stern voice rang clear and strong again. "*A'ohe ou kuleana.*" she said. "You need not concern yourself of those things." The difference this time I understood exactly what she was trying to tell me those many years ago. She had wanted me to accept her as she was. There was no need for me to know every single nuance of her life. Such things were not necessary. I should have been satisfied knowing she was alive and well, and grateful for the opportunity to share some time with her. After all, shouldn't that be what matters most?

I had that turtle bundled up tighter than a drum and still she managed to escape. A clearer omen there could not have been. It was as if *tutu* was again reminding me not to be so meddlesome and to appreciate things for what they were. *Ka 'ea* was full of life, going about her business as she had done for so many years. I should have been satisfied knowing she was healthy and robust, and successful in fulfilling her life's destiny. Moreover, I should have been appreciative that she had allowed me to share a moment in time with her. In return, she asked only for respect and privacy. It seems now only fair to permit her this remaining shred of dignity as the modern world encroaches upon her very existence. During our brief encounter on that remote beach that night, she reminded me that she was my contemporary and not an amusing scientific curiosity. With renewed appreciation, I wiped the blended rain and tears from my face. Slowly I turned my back to the sea and walked silently to camp. If *ka 'ea* needs to be burdened with some *haole* contraption, it will have to be done without my participation. I will honor her wishes and bother her no more. I owe at least that much to my *tutu*.