

Nesting Turtle Science Flawed

Last month, "Splash!" focused on Hawai'i's recovered green turtles and Dr. George Balazs' "case for bringing their stewardship back home to local control after 37 years in the hands of NOAA and USFWS." Here's the follow up.

Delisting turtles does not mean "no protection," as Dr. Balazs explained. "Given the 5 years of mandatory close federal monitoring for a de-listed species, there is indeed absolutely no risk in de-listing given the robust scope and magnitude of population growth we have been seeing for at least a decade."

Dr. Balazs was concerned that "Splash!" mentioned but did not counter Dr. Jack Kittinger's et al. position that turtles still need federal protection and should not be delisted. Dr. Kittinger's argument basically revolves around the large numbers of green sea turtles nesting at French Frigate Shoals, the largest atoll in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands.

"You gave Kittinger et al. unchallenged credence in support of recovery not having been reached—presumably until a great many or all of the supposed former nesting beaches in the Main Hawaiian Islands have been restored."

One opposition voice to Dr. Kittinger et al is Dr. Craig Severance. Dr. Severance is a neighbor, a fishing friend and a NOAA scientist who also writes for HFN.

"For the record, I am an anthropologist, and I advise NOAA Fisheries and NOAA Protected Resources," wrote Dr. Severance in NOAA public testimony to support turtle delisting. "In this comment I am responding as an individual and a fisherman, who regularly sees an abundance of turtles on Hawai'i island. . . ."

"The Status Review Document section on the proposed Central North Pacific DPS relies heavily on retrospective projections of historic MHI beach nesting trends and on the Kittinger et al. 2013 article. In my view that article is flawed and does not meet the NOAA standard for best scientific information available.

"It relies uncritically on a survey of archeological midden reports and implies that evidence of turtle bone in archeological sites means that there were probably nesting beaches nearby. Midden analysis is fraught with uncertainties. . . ."

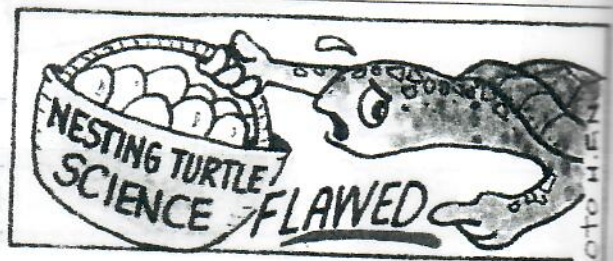
"The article also conflates nesting beaches with basking beaches. Not all basking beaches were/are historic nesting beaches."

Thanks to Craig and George for giving shape to the green sea turtle recovery story.

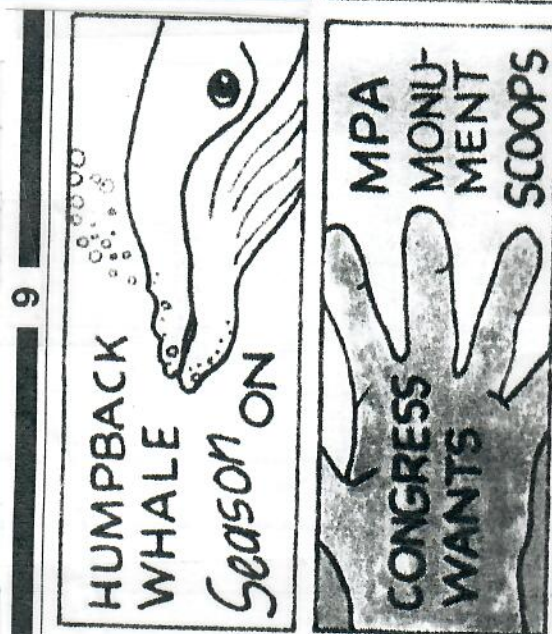
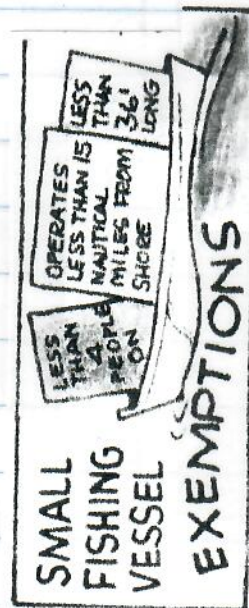
... Bob

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SPLASH!



NOV. 2015
HFN



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Bring Honu Conservation Home

■ As a citizen volunteer and the co-chair of the Oceania Region of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group, George Balazs recently wrote a letter to the editor to newspapers around the state. The letter said it's time to bring U.S. federal endangered species efforts for green sea turtles back home to Hawai'i.

George, a 33-year NOAA zoologist working with Hawai'i marine turtles, wrote the following in the Hawaii Tribune Herald:

"The cultural revival of the Hawaiian people throughout the past century is one of the many joys I've witnessed since making Hawai'i my home in 1965. Caring for the land and sea, speaking Hawaiian, ocean voyaging, self-determination and the quest for justice all come to mind.

"Who we are is tied to where we are and where we come from. And so it is for the green sea turtle—the honu of Hawai'i. The honu is bonded to the Hawaiian culture genetically, geographically and ecologically. In the early 1970s, the honu's survival was in serious jeopardy until sensible management was restored when the state banned all commercial harvesting of the turtles.

"Since then, the turtle, like the Hawaiian culture itself, has flourished and expanded beyond all expectation.

"The time now has come to return stewardship of the honu home to Hawai'i, where it rightfully belongs."

George wrote that there are seven species of ocean turtles swimming the world. As descendants of ancient reptiles, these turtles are culturally woven into sea people's lives who used them for food, fortune telling, pets and funeral totems.

All green sea turtles in Hawai'i share the same genetic lineage. This is a unique subset of the greater global population of green sea turtles. This subset is known as a "Distinct Population Segment," or "Regional Management Unit." In 2012, the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs petitioned NOAA Fisheries that the Hawai'i green sea turtles be a distinct population segment and be removed from listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Ninety percent of turtle's nesting is on French Frigate Shoals, which is controlled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The turtle disease fibro papilloma virus first appeared in 1930s. This widespread affliction manifests as lobed tumors on skin, eyes, mouth and internal organs. The infection frequency seems to be declining.

George and his wife, Linda, presented their paper, "Fall and Rise of the Hawaiian Honu: A 50-Year Witness to Cultural and Conservation," at this August's University of Hawaii Hilo 23rd Annual Hawaii Conservation Conference. They said the good news is that "In 2012, Hawai'i's green turtles, or honu (*Chelonia mydas*), were downlisted from Endangered to the category of Least Concern following a comprehensive assessment by the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group."



CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARADVERTISER.COM

Walter Ritte, center, publicly disenrolled Wednesday from the Native Hawaiian Roll and withdrew his candidacy from the Na'i Aupuni Native Hawaiian election and convention, calling for a boycott of the election. Alika Desha, left, of the Royal Order of Kamehameha I, gave his support to Ritte, with Ritte's wife, Loretta.

HSA 10/29/2015

Splash!

by Bob Duerr



The IUNC Species Survival Commission Marine Turtle Specialist Group stated that it has “230 experts in over 80 countries, and the MTSG is the global authority on marine turtle research and conservation.”

According to George, the Oceania Region of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group changed the green sea turtle “listing based on a very thorough 2-year-long assessment by a team of 10 globally respected sea turtle scientists.”

“The IUNC Red List of Threatened Species” report itself commented, “Analysis of published peer-reviewed literature indicates that the endemic and genetically isolated Hawaiian Green Turtle is approaching full recovery to pre-exploitation levels, continues to grow, and anthropogenic hazards do not appear to be restricting population recovery.”

In its Pacific region of over 100 million square miles, IUCN Oceania is committed to “community-based protected area management.” With honu recovery, the need for federally mandated Endangered Species Act control diminishes. The Switzerland-based IUCN supports Hawai‘i home rule for conservation efforts.

Should the same home rule logic be applied to humpback whale recovery? Instead of seeking ecosystem management and control of one-third of Hawaiian waters, should the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary pat itself on the back for ESA recovery, pack their bags and migrate back to Washington, D.C.?

Not all are rushing to embrace the Balazs and IUCN honu recovery. NOAA now wants to reclassify the turtle from endangered to threatened. The geographical isolation of the Hawaiian green sea turtle is seen as a detriment to recovery.

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One cautious view is seen in “Using Historical Data To Assess the Biogeography of Population Recovery,” written by John N. Kittinger, Kyle S. Van Houtan, Loren E. McClenachan and Amanda L. Lawrence. John and his group said, “Our data suggest the current concentration of green turtle nesting on French Frigate Shoals is a historical anomaly. Nesting was once widely distributed across the Hawaiian archipelago, from the inhabited MHI throughout the remote atolls of NWHI. Eighty percent of historically major nesting sites have been extirpated or are severely depleted.”

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In what could be seen as a barb to IUCN’s opinion, John said their “research suggests that assessing recovery without historical data on spatial patterns may overlook important ecological dynamics at the population or ecosystem level, which can result in improper or inadequate conservation assessments and recovery targets.”

Like the humpback whale, the honu, though recovering, is still caught in the “land and power in Hawai‘i” throw net. With the U.S. bureaucracy’s ‘opihi-like grabbing power, bringing conservation home to Hawai‘i may be harder to untangle than recovering a drowning endangered species from an illegal cross net.

Until September 25, NOAA is accepting comments on delisting Hawai‘i green sea turtles. Submit all electronic comments via <<http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=NOAA-NMFS-2012-0154>>, click the “Comment Now!” icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments. Submit written comments to the Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.