

Turtle trouble

Area residents complain about blocked homes and animal mistreatment

By Susan Essoyan
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Beads of salt water gleamed in his dark hair as 25-year-old Josh Sebert stepped out of the ocean, breathless after snorkeling with Hawaiian green sea turtles at Laniakea Beach on Oahu's North Shore.

"There were two of them swimming around, and I was really, really close to them," he said last week, the imprint of his mask outlining his eager eyes. "They were eating, doing their thing, and it was awesome."

A few yards up the beach, a 230-pound turtle lay flaked out on the sand, eyes closed, as a dozen people clustered around, taking turns posing and snapping photos.

Turtle tips

Hawaiian green sea turtles are a threatened species protected by state and federal law. It is illegal to disturb them and violators are subject to fines.

- » Never feed or try to feed them.
- » Do not crowd, handle or tease them.
- » Observe turtles from a distance.
- » Always allow them a clear route to deeper water.
- » Do not touch them.

In the past few years, Laniakea has become a favorite spot for green sea turtles to bask in the sun and feed on the ample seaweed in its waters. As word has spread, this once-tranquil strip of white sand has turned into a tourism magnet with a new nickname: "Turtle Beach."

But its popularity is now posing problems -- for the threatened turtle species and for residents of the area. Over-eager visitors have been grabbing the turtles, luring them with handfuls of green seaweed and even building sand castles on their backs.

Curious beachgoers stream across Kamehameha Highway, risking accidents and slowing traffic to a stop on a daily basis. Illegally parked tour vans disgorge crowds. Residents complain about blocked access to their homes and commercialization of the beach.

"All of a sudden, it's like *the* tourist spot," said Toni Sickler, a North Shore resident who surfs often at Laniakea. "Somehow, somebody's got to take control. I'm all for people seeing the turtles, but they don't keep their distance."

"People tug on the fins, because the parent wants to get the picture," she said. "And the turtles are getting aggressive because they're getting fed now all the time."

The situation is catching the attention of authorities. Reacting to numerous complaints of turtle harassment, the Marine Turtle Research Program, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, launched a "show turtles aloha" campaign last month.

Bold yellow banners on the beach tell visitors "Please do not crowd, handle, feed or tease" the turtles. A permanent sign tacked to a twisted ironwood tree notes that it is illegal to disturb the turtles on land or in the ocean and that violators are subject to fines.

"It's gone from dozens of people daily to hundreds daily, up to a thousand, visiting the beach," said George Balazs, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program. "Many of them were feeding the turtles. It has changed the turtles' behavior."

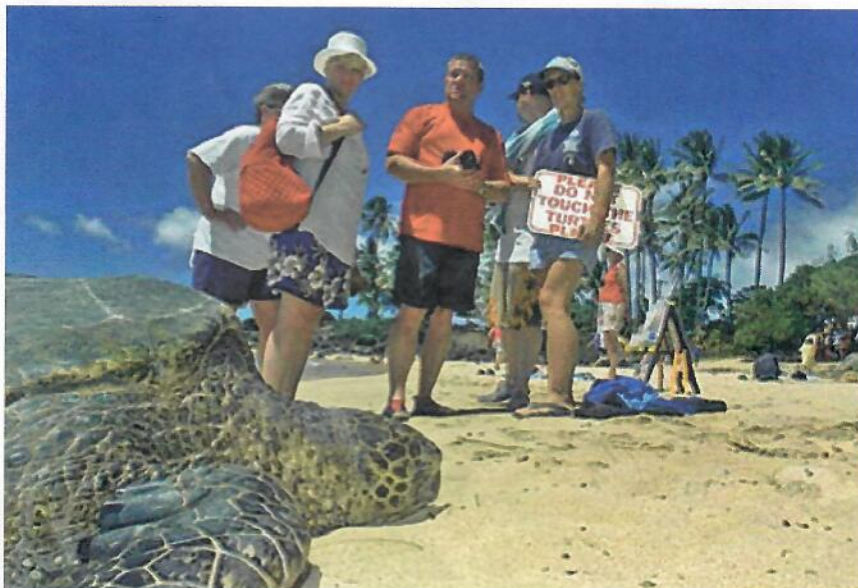
As these gentle, vegetarian creatures started to associate people with food, they have recently nipped children as well as adults with their sharp beaks, he said.



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Tour bus visitors gathered to view and photograph a green sea

turtle sunning itself at Laniakea Beach. The Marine Turtle Research Program advises people not to feed or tease the turtles with food and not to touch them. Incidents of nipping and biting by the turtles have been reported.



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Erin Seibert from the Marine Turtle Research Program observed a green sea turtle at Laniakea Beach with visitors Ed and Penny Meyers. Seibert spends time at the beach monitoring the turtles and educates visitors about the threatened species.

Every day since July 7, either Balazs or a staff member has staked out the beach, monitoring people's behavior and urging them to enjoy the turtles from a distance. The program also has sent fliers to tour bus companies and tries to make personal contact with each van driver who comes to the beach.

But it's hard for one staff member a day to keep up with the constant flow of people to the beach. And the problems extend beyond the beach.

"I think it's great that George Balazs is personally monitoring the situation, but I think we need 10 Georges," said Denise Antolini, a professor of environmental law who lives in nearby Pupukea. She and other residents would like to see a task force address the ecological, traffic, safety and health issues, such as the lack of toilets.

"We need to bring together the large number of concerned residents and agencies with responsibility and come up with a long-term solution that's beneficial to the turtles and the North Shore," she

NEWS

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Sunday,
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2005Turtles are
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Laniakea
BeachTeachers
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aquaculture
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task force

said.

A few turtles began hauling out at Laniakea in early 2000, and wildlife officials were peppered with calls from people who thought the animals were in distress, Balazs said. But basking and resting on the beach is normal behavior for the species. Their numbers have grown, and 60 to 80 turtles now swim in the water at Laniakea on a good day, he said.

Green sea turtles are found throughout Hawaiian waters, and pop up regularly even in tourist hot spots like Waikiki and Hanauma Bay. But word of the turtle congregation at Laniakea has spread recently through guidebooks and other media, tour companies and even city bus drivers. The slowdown in traffic is enough to pique the interest of passersby.

"We were pretty much curious," said Miriam Whalay, who lives in Nuuanu and stopped by the beach with her husband, Chris, last week. "The traffic just stopped right here. We were thinking there was some kind of festival in Haleiwa. I had no idea the turtles were here."

She was part of a group admiring a basking turtle known to scientists as "L-4." Balazs, on duty that day in a broad-brimmed cloth hat, said the female turtle had been clocked diving as deep as 330 feet in the ocean and makes a 1,000-mile round-trip to French Frigate Shoals to nest.

Balazs, a gregarious, 62-year-old biologist, knows the species better than any other human being, having devoted his life to their welfare. Balazs first became interested in Hawaiian sea turtles in 1969 when he and his wife, Linda, saw them being hoisted live from boats at Lahaina Harbor into waiting pickup trucks in a virtual assembly line, back in the days when turtles were hunted for their meat.

Concerned that the species might get wiped out, he began camping out in a pup tent at French Frigate Shoals in 1973 to document their numbers. Bolstered by that data, he later helped win a statewide ban on commercial harvesting in 1975. And in 1978, Hawaiian green sea turtles were named a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The turtles have made a dramatic rebound since Balazs first started studying them. In 1973, the junior scientist found only 70 Hawaiian green sea turtles nesting on East Island in French Frigate Shoals. In the summer of 2004, his program counted 540 females there. The numbers fluctuate because every turtle doesn't nest every year, but Balazs called 2004 "our greatest year on record."

"It's an amazing story that we have 'problems' to deal with like this,

in terms of a proliferation of sea turtles, a species that many, many people in Hawaii love," he said. "To be dealing with the issue of crowding is certainly a lot more comfortable than it was in 1972 and 1973, when the same tourists that are now on the beach were ordering turtle steak for \$13.95."

Still, residents are hoping some solutions will come quickly both for the turtles' sake and their own.

"Traffic used to back up when surf was giant, but now it backs up almost every day," said Gil Riviere, chairman of the North Shore Neighborhood Board's Traffic and Transportation Committee. "The bottleneck is right at Laniakea. People are feeling held hostage to their houses."

Balazs said his program will continue its presence on the beach at least until the winter swells begin, when he predicts that problems will ease up.

"As soon as school starts and the first north swell comes, the issues at Laniakea will decline considerably," he said. "People won't be coming in those high numbers. And when the waves get real big, much of the sand sucks away and there is less habitat to bask on. The turtles change their behavior."

"I've had people say we need to close off this beach, but that's not Hawaii," he added. "That's not why we protected this species. We have a growing, recovering population of green turtles. They're willing to share their habitat with the community, but we need to live up to our responsibility and treat them with respect."

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