



## OCEAN WATCH

Susan Scott

### Sea turtles both familiar and mysterious

**L**AST WEEK, I drove to the North Shore to visit some friends I haven't seen in seven months. Since they were eating when I arrived, and still eating when I left, I didn't see much of them. I saw enough, though, to know they are being loved and protected as much as ever.

My friends are the sea turtles of Laniakea that occasionally lie on the beach there. Workers have tagged about 20 in that bay, and about 10 of those regularly crawl onto the sand and sleep.

Or not. Some days, like last week when I was there, none hauled out at all.

"When will the turtles come out?" visitors asked us volunteer guardians. No one knows.

"Why do they come out?" they wanted to know. We don't know that, either.

*Researchers don't know where or how green sea turtles spend the first two years of their lives.*

"What's special about this particular place?" Another unknown.

Given that thousands of turtles swim in Hawaii's waters today, it seems odd that so much about them is still a mystery. Researchers, for instance, don't know how or where juveniles spend their first few years.

Turtle hatchlings, which fit in the palm of your hand, run to the sea right after hatching and, four to six years later, show up on coastlines about dinner-plate size. No one knows what happens in between.

In an effort to find out, NMFS workers raised four Hawaiian green turtles hatched at Sea Life Park. Last month, biologists attached satellite tags to the 2-year-olds and released them from the cruise ship *Pride of Hawaii* about 10 miles north of Kauai.

By tracking the turtles' paths, researchers hope to learn where the youngsters go. This would help biologists better understand what's important to the survival of baby turtles. It might also help fishermen steer clear of dense turtle areas.

Green sea turtles are native to warm waters throughout the world's oceans, but they regularly sleep on beaches in only two island groups: the Galapagos Islands and, lucky us, Hawaii.

We're also lucky to have an active, successful, ongoing turtle conservation program for the past 30 years. Thanks to the leadership of federal turtle biologist George Balazs, turtles seem to be everywhere in Hawaii waters today.

It's so common to see turtles here now that it's easy to think they are common everywhere.

Not so. Green sea turtles in other nations have minimal protection, if any, and are surprisingly scarce. I asked Scott, one of my crew members on my recent South Pacific voyage, "How many turtles did we see between Tahiti and Australia?"

He thought a minute. "Two. No, wait. Three, I think." I also remember only three sightings.

Inside Australia's Great Barrier Reef, though, that number changed dramatically. Turtles are so abundant in that national marine park that we saw them from the boat nearly every day.

There is still much to learn about sea turtles, but from my own observation, two facts stand out: One is that turtle conservation programs work, and the other is that Hawaii has a good one.

The turtles of Laniakea should make us all proud.

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