



Saving green sea turtles

The Bellows Beach campground will be closed through Sept. 4 because honu are nesting at the park for the first time in documented history.

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local PLUS



LANCE CPL. SAMANTHA SANCHEZ / MARINE CORPS BASE HAWAII

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Green sea turtles are nesting at Bellows Beach for the first time in documented history — and humans are being asked to tread lightly around them.

It is the first time U.S. Marine Corps Base Hawaii has documented nesting at Bellows Beach, according to spokesman Maj. Roberto Martins, possibly as a result of reduced foot traffic due to the coronavirus pandemic. Without as much traffic, turtle tracks and nests were more visible to

Signs warning of nesting green sea turtles are placed at Bellows Beach. So far, 13 nesting sites have been identified at the beach.

natural resources experts.

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To help protect them, the city Department of Parks and Recreation will keep the Bellows Field Beach Park Campground closed through Sept. 4.

In social media posts, DPR said the campground would remain closed until then “due to unprecedented turtle nesting” in order to protect the honu and let them complete their nesting cycle without interruption.

While the sea turtles — more popularly known as honu in Hawaii — have nested along various Oahu shorelines before, this is believed to be the first

time it has been documented in the Bellows camp area, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“This is very exciting,” said USFWS biologist Nanea Valeros. “It’s exciting to see a turtle nest, and there aren’t many words to describe what it’s like to sit and quietly watch as she digs her nest, or to watch as hatchlings emerge. ... It’s very special.”

However, at the same time, it is important for the public to remember the turtles need space and quiet.

The Marine Corps has put up signs at the beach and roped off the nesting

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sites to warn the public of their presence, and personnel from its Environmental Division as well as the USFWS will be monitoring them.

The public is asked to avoid marked areas where the nests are contained, and to obey posted signs. Off-roading and vehicles on the beach are not allowed. Also, dogs are not allowed at the campground or beach at Bellows Field Beach Park.

Additionally, people are asked to walk behind the nests and avoid passing between the nest areas and ocean to prevent making depressions in the sand that could trap the hatchlings.

USFWS biologist Joy Browning said there are an estimated 20 green sea tur-

WHEN YOU SEE A TURTLE OR HATCHLING ON THE BEACH

- >> Do not approach it, and watch from a distance.
- >> Avoid using flash photography/videography or anything with an artificial light source, including from cellphones and flashlights, because they can disorient nesting females and hatchlings.
- >> Maintain a clear path between the turtle and ocean. Do not block a hatchling or try to direct it.
- >> Maintain quiet. Noises can disrupt nesting females and hatchlings.
- >> No off-roading or vehicles allowed on the beach.
- >> Dogs are not allowed at Bellows Field Beach Park or campground.
- >> Avoid passing between nest areas and ocean. Walk behind nests.

Source: USFWS, MCBH



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Warning signs are posted at Bellows Beach.

tle nests along the stretch of shoreline between Waimanalo and the Marine Corps Base Hawaii in Kaneohe.

While the majority — 90%

— of green sea turtles breed and nest at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, they have also nested on every main

Hawaiian Island, according to Browning.

Some factors contributing to why the turtles may have nested at Bellows this year

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include the quieter beaches due to recent stay-at-home orders. Also, Hurricane Walaka had wiped out original nesting grounds at French Frigate Shoals two years ago.

Until studies are done, none of this can be confirmed for sure, said Browning.

Green sea turtles are considered a threatened species in Hawaii and an endangered species elsewhere in the Pacific, and are protected by both federal and state laws.

In addition to keeping a proper distance from sea turtles, using the “rule of thumb,” Valeros advises the public to avoid flash photography or videography, or any artificial light sources around them because it can disorient the mother turtles and hatchlings. The area between the nest and ocean should also remain clear.

Female green sea turtles, depending on size, can lay from 60 to 160 eggs per clutch, and can return in two-week periods to lay more over several months before leaving the nesting area.

Sea turtle eggs usually incubate for about 60 days, after which hatchlings emerge and make a beeline for the ocean, guided by moonlight.

Only 1 in 10,000 sea turtle hatchlings makes it to adulthood, by some estimates.

Valeros said the public’s help is vital to helping the hatchlings so that future generations can enjoy them as well.

Reports of sea turtle nest sites and hatchlings that need protection can be reported to the NOAA hotline at 888-256-9840. Reports of violations at Bellows can be reported to the conservation law enforcement officer at 387-7975.