



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park of  
American Samoa

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## National Park of American Samoa News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### Endangered Species Day: America's Commitment to Protecting Our Wildlife Heritage

PAGO PAGO, American Samoa—Since 2006, the U.S. Senate has proclaimed the third Friday of May as “Endangered Species Day,” a national celebration of America’s commitment to protecting our wildlife heritage. On this day we celebrate endangered species success stories, including the protection and recovery of the American bald eagle and also bring awareness to endangered species in our own local areas.

The National Park Service (NPS) works to sustain and recover over a thousand populations of federally listed threatened and endangered species. At least one or more endangered species are found in 204 of the 394 National Park Service units. American Samoa is home to several species listed in the Endangered Species Act including two sea turtles (*Ia sa*) that visit our waters and make their nests both inside and outside the National Park of American Samoa (NPSA) boundaries. Hawksbill (*Laumei ulumanu/faiuga*) and Green (*Laumei tualimu/meamata*) sea turtles utilize the sandy beaches here to lay their eggs. After hatching on land, the baby sea turtles crawl to the ocean and swim out to begin their life at sea. An interesting aspect of sea turtle behavior is that after decades of maturing, sea turtles will navigate thousands of miles back to the location of their birth to lay eggs. Some species will even return to the exact beach where they were born.

The *Ia sa* (sea turtle) and the Samoan people share a long heritage and sea turtles appear in many Samoan songs, legends, and artwork. Once, sea turtles were a traditional source of material for objects like combs and fishhooks. They were also a source of food. In those times, sea turtles were abundant, but sadly the situation has changed dramatically and *Ia sa* have become rare and in danger of going extinct. Afioga Misa'alefua John Hudson grew up on Ofu Island said that he

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“remembers seeing many large sea turtles in the water and their tracks on all the sand beaches when he was a boy.” He describes how you could lure a sea turtle by placing a large leaf out in the water and waiting for the turtle to go under the shade of it. Nowadays, many young Samoans have never seen a living sea turtle at all.

There are territorial and federal laws that impose penalties up to \$250,000 in fines and one year in prison for killing a sea turtle or importing sea turtle products into the territory. These laws are a response to the seriousness of the threats to sea turtles. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists the Green as “endangered” and the Hawksbill as “critically endangered” because their populations have declined worldwide by as much as 67% and 80%, respectively, in the last three generations. The Endangered Species Act has had success in preventing the extinction of many species including the gray wolf, the grizzly bear, and the humpback whale. However, helping our sea turtles is a difficult matter because they travel great distances as part of their life cycle. A turtle may be protected while it is here in territorial waters, but it might spend much of its life in other places where laws may not be as strict or enforced.

The Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) has been monitoring sea turtles in the territory for many years. DMWR nesting beach monitor Ben McDonough, working with Wildlife Biologist Alden Tagarino, currently monitors sea turtle nesting to determine the nesting season, the number of turtles and hatchlings, and the locations of nesting sites locally. Tagarino has also attached satellite tags to adult post-nesting hawksbill turtles and tracked them over the larger Pacific region. He successfully tracked one turtle (named Ms. To'aga after her nesting) for almost a full year from January 19, 2010 to December 27, 2010. In that time, Ms. To'aga travelled about 6000 km and her last known location was near Pitcairn Islands. Biologists studying sea turtle navigation have found that they use the earth's magnetic field to find their way. It is still a mystery how exactly this built in compass works, but evidently it works very well since after many years roaming distant Pacific feeding grounds, a mother sea turtle can still find her way back to the site of her own birth to lay eggs for a new generation.

Endangered Species Day is a good opportunity to think about how lucky we are to have these amazing creatures so close and what we can do to help them thrive. There are a few things we can all do to help the sea turtles. First, if you see a sea turtle on the beach, don't touch or move it. If you think it might be in trouble, call DMWR or NPSA to report it and get help. Don't tamper with nests or baby sea turtles. The best thing we can do to help them is let them hatch and crawl naturally. If you know there is a nest on the beach, try to keep dogs away so they won't disturb the eggs. If it is possible, turn off lights in the vicinity of a sea turtle nest. Artificial light at night disrupts a baby sea turtle's instinctual navigation system and can make it crawl the wrong way.

Finally, fight litter. It can seem like a hopeless mission when we see all the trash people leave on the ground, but take heart, there are many people who want to respect the land and keep the islands beautiful, we just need to keep trying. Trash, especially plastics, is hazardous to marine life and it is easy for it to end up in the ocean when not disposed of properly. Sea turtles will try to eat plastic because underwater, plastic bags look like one of their favorite foods, jellyfish. Instead of getting a tasty meal, they end up choking or clogging their stomachs. Agencies like DMWR and NPSA are working hard to spread the word about sea turtles to the children at school and the larger community. It is always an amazing sight to catch a glimpse of an *Ia sa* gliding gracefully over the reef. Unfortunately, this sight is not as common as it once was. Hopefully, if we all do our part, these sea turtles will not become extinct and will again visit our waters and beaches in great numbers.

The National Park of American Samoa was established in 1988 to preserve the coral reefs, tropical rainforest, archeological and cultural resources, the habitat of fruit bats, and to provide educational opportunities for visitors and residents. National park lands and waters are leased from villages and the American Samoa Government through a long-term agreement with the National Park Service.

For more information about visiting the National Park of American Samoa, call 699-3982, email [NPSA\\_Info@nps.gov](mailto:NPSA_Info@nps.gov), or go to [www.nps.gov/npsa](http://www.nps.gov/npsa). Also, visit the national park's Facebook and Twitter pages.

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