Environment

Hawaii Marines Are Now Guarding The Nests Of Endangered Species

Green sea turtles are now nesting at a windward Oahu beach where the military trains.

By Kevin Knodell / September 6, 2020

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In June, Hawaiian green sea turtle nests were discovered at Bellows Beach. It was the first time that they had been documented on the beach since the military began keeping track.

The Marines train to fight on land, sea and air. But as they do, they are often navigating ecosystems that are home to a diverse mix of animal and plant life.

Since the 1970s, federal legislation has called on the military to pay closer attention to the environmental impact of their training, and to manage the land in its possession. To that end the Marine Corps employs specialists that include biologists, arborists and pest control specialists.

“There’s a whole broad range of things that we do,” said Lt. Col. Timothy Pochop, the active duty officer that leads the Environmental Compliance and Protection Division.

Kevin Knodell/Civil Beat

Lt. Col. Tim Pochop, director of the Environmental Compliance and Protection Division at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, looks out at Kaneohe Bay.

Pochop spent most of his career as a helicopter pilot flying sometimes dangerous missions around the globe. But he got his current job because he'd studied zoology and environmental management in college.

"It's not just about the legal obligation," Pochop said of his duties. For him this posting is a dream job, giving him a rare opportunity to simultaneously fulfill his passions for both service in the Marine Corps and environmental protection and research.

They work to document and protect endangered species, control invasive species and identify and preserve archaeological and cultural sites around the areas where Marines train.

While Hawaiian green sea turtles at Bellows are the first of that species the Marines have recorded, they're not the first turtles that Lance Bookless has seen nesting on Marine training grounds.

Bookless, the senior natural resources manager at MCBH, notes that in 2009 he got to watch a nest of Olive Ridley turtles hatch and make their way to the ocean. The Olive Ridleys are more commonly associated with the Gulf of Mexico.

Bookless said that in the 1970s, the base had a single employee whose job it was to look after both environmental and cultural resources.

“It was still a pretty new idea for the military,” he explained. In 1982 it became a two-person role and has slowly grown to a much larger team with varied specialties. “I think we’re up close to 30 people in our department,” said Bookless.

Bookless himself is a Marine veteran. He first arrived at MCBH in late 1988 as a Marine officer on active duty. When he switched to the reserves he got a job at the Department of Land and Natural Resources as a survey forester.

When a job opened up protecting the land at MCBH in 1996 he jumped at the opportunity.

A hatchling from one of the Hawaiian green turtle nests on the beach at Marine Corps training grounds.

“We do a lot of outreach to try to inform folks of what’s around here and what their

impacts are and how to mitigate those impacts," said MCBH Natural Resource Manager Keith Roberts, an Army veteran turned biologist.

They evaluate the potential impacts of training exercises and construction projects. They also brief commanders and tell them what measures they have to follow to protect the environment as they train.

Bookless noted that among the species that's been a top emphasis for monitoring is the red-footed boobie. When Marines trained to prepare to deploy for Operation Desert Storm a fire broke out that seriously threatened a colony of the seabirds.

Since then the Marine Corps has ramped up both conservation and monitoring of the birds, tagging and tracking them to learn more about nesting habits. "We got pictures of how these things fly out when they go out to sea," said Bookless. "That is probably the (species) that's been studied the most, at least for us here."

Bookless said that the military culture has changed and that Marines on active duty today have a much better appreciation for environmental requirements.

"Every once in awhile you'll get some of the more stubborn operators who don't understand why they can't just do whatever they want," said Pochop. "In their mind, it's military land and it's meant for them to train."

But he said that for younger Marines that's usually not a problem. "Privates are pretty good at doing what they're told," Pochop said.

Bookless said that the team actually deals more with littering on the beaches from recreation than training.

Marines today are trained to pick up after themselves — as much for environmental reasons as to ensure that their enemies can't track them when they're deployed for battle.

But education is a constant process. When Hurricane Douglas approached Hawaii in July, Pochop said some base community members tried to fill sandbags to fortify their homes with sand from the beach. The environmental team had to stop them.

“This is living sand,” explains Pochop, noting that between turtles laying eggs, crabs and other critters burrowing and living in it the beach is a delicate and vital ecosystem.

“There’s also human remains,” he added. Traditional Hawaiian graves are scattered throughout the beaches and training areas — and Marines have orders not to disturb the dead.

A red-footed booby flies off the coast of Oahu. The seabirds are one of several endangered species that live at Marine Corps Base Hawaii.

But they reiterate that for the most part, outreach has worked — and that they depend on both Marines on base and people in the surrounding communities to help them preserve and manage the land.

“One of our biggest programs is a volunteer program,” Bookless said, noting that it’s helped the team with managing invasive species, monitoring the turtles and a variety of other responsibilities. “That’s really made a difference.”

Marines roped off 13 green turtle nests when they were first discovered in June. Since

then even more nests have appeared at both Bellows Beach and at Marine Corps Base Hawaii.

The Marines believe the turtles may have begun nesting in April when stay-home orders kept people off the beach. It's also possible that the destruction of East Island during Hurricane Walaka in 2018 eliminated nesting grounds, leaving the turtles looking for alternatives for nesting.

As the Marines work to further document and understand the ecosystems on land they train on they frequently collaborate with University of Hawaii faculty and students.

Students often help them with research programs and the Marines have opened up parts of the base to students working on their own projects who want to study wildlife there.

Some of the members of the team have pet projects of their own as they study the ecosystems of military training areas. Roberts said his favorite species on the base is the Hawaiian gallinule, a black waterbird that resembles a chicken with a red shield on its face, that he believes is often overlooked.

"There's very little publicity on it, but it's very elusive," he explains. "We know they're there and we're finding them increasingly around the base. So we've taken note of that. And we're looking into doing more studies."

About the Author

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Kevin Knodell covers the military and veterans and in Hawaii and the greater Pacific for Civil Beat as a corps member for Report For America, a national nonprofit that places journalists in local news rooms.

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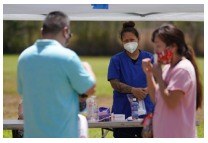

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