

Let the data determine how to protect green sea turtles

By Mike Markrich

A petition in February by the Hawaiian Civic Club to the federal government to officially "delist" green sea turtles from the list of threatened species under the Endangered Species Act has been met with anger by local and national environmental organizations.

Although the latest data from the National Marine Fisheries Service indicates green sea turtle stocks are growing at 5.7 percent per year, and that there are an estimated 61,000 turtles in Hawaii, opponents claim that the current laws, on the books since 1978, are necessary to keep fishers from once again driving the green sea turtle to the point of extinction. Perhaps it is time when considering this matter to think of delisting not as an isolated argument but as part of a larger conversation. For it raises the question of whether the same science works for everyone or whether there is a cultural bias against natural resource management decisions when they affect Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.

Two years ago, I attended a

large international fishing conference in Honolulu. In the evening I happened to stand behind two mainland-based members of a prominent national environmental organization that takes a strong position against commercial fishing of tuna.

One of them, his plate piled high with finely sliced pieces of raw ahi, said in a loud whisper, "I hope nobody sees me; this is my second helping. It's so good." Then they walked off happily, chopsticks and ahi in hand. Even people with the best of intentions, when it comes to managing an ocean resource, are sometimes unable to resist a good sushi bar.

The point here is that managing tuna, green sea turtles or anything else in the ocean is now dependent on complex mathematical models. After years of experimentation, the science and math behind this is not perfect but it provides guidelines as to what can be harvested and when. Either we as a society accept that this premise works for everyone or we do not.

In 1998, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released a detailed recovery plan



NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE PHOTO

Green sea turtles bask on one of the small islands of French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The Hawaiian Civic Club wants to remove the turtle from a federal list of threatened species so they can be eaten for food.

for the green sea turtle and specified among other things there be an average population of approximately 5,000 nesting females to maintain the green sea turtle population in the entire Pacific region.

The opponents of delisting talk in terms of the need for at least 5,000 known protected nesting females for Hawaii alone. Since there are presently an average of 1,500 nesting females here at any one

time, it could take decades more to reach this number. Their point is that for the greater good, scientific goalposts can be moved at any time. They prefer to err on the side of caution.

Native Hawaiians for delisting see this attitude as demeaning to them — a residue of the colonial "do as I say not as I do" era, an attitude they say has embittered relations between native fishers and fishery regulators over access to ocean resources they consider a birthright. As for the number of females: Current studies indicate females breed every two to three years, and that 3,000-4,500 females are in the current Hawaii nesting pool, more than enough, they say, to maintain the population in a carefully managed fishery.

The Hawaiian Civic Club is right to ask that the same rules applied to everyone be applied to their petition for delisting. They are not asking to drive green sea turtles to extinction but only to eat them as food once again. The Native Hawaiians are entitled to their dignity just like anybody else.

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