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This turtle tale tells of rare Hawaiian visitor

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IMAGINE this: You and your family are camping on Lanai's Hulopoe Beach. It's a beautiful moon-lit evening. Children are playing; everyone's enjoying the summer night.

Suddenly, the kids come running, breathless and pointing. A turtle, they report, has come up the beach and is now under a kiawe tree. A huge turtle.

The adults check it out and discover a miracle of nature is occurring right before their eyes: A 5- to 6-foot-long leatherback sea turtle is laying eggs on a Hawaii beach for the first time in recorded history.

For most Hawaii residents, this would be an interesting experience. They would watch for a while, report it to the authorities, then go on about their business. But not Lanai's Mano, Davis, and Kahoolalahala families, to whom this actually happened last July 20. For them, the leatherback turtle nest became an affair of the heart.

Although leatherbacks are considered one of Hawaii's native sea turtles, few residents know about them. One reason for this is the turtles have never before been seen ashore in Hawaii. In fact, before this July event, no one thought leatherbacks ever laid eggs in Hawaii.

But leatherbacks do swim in Hawaiian waters and are occasionally seen by sailors and fishermen. When one is near your boat, it's hard to miss.

These are the biggest of all sea turtles, growing up to 1,400 pounds (the largest greens are about 400 pounds) and measuring up to 8 feet long.

Most leatherbacks nest in the tropics of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, but during the warmer months they migrate to cooler seas searching for jellyfish.

It is during these migrations that the gigantic turtles pass through Hawaii's waters.

Leatherback turtles are in danger of extinction, not because of people killing the turtles (their meat tastes bad), but because of egg poaching. For years, people have been stealing these turtle eggs from nesting beaches in Malaysia, South Africa, New Guinea, Australia, Mexico and several other places.

But not in Hawaii, thanks to some caring people on Lanai.

After notifying authorities about the eggs, Mano, Davis and Kahoolalahala family members looked up information on leatherback turtles in books and on the Internet.

They learned how special leatherbacks are to Hawaii and decided to guard the spot until the eggs hatched. The leatherback turtle hui (alliance) was born.

Hui members helped wildlife workers build a fence around the nest and set up a long-term camp. Some made fliers, handing them to interested beach-goers.

Others checked the nest's sand temperature each day and recorded the information in notebooks. When a high surf threatened the nest, the families borrowed sand bags from the nearby Manele Bay Hotel to bunker the nest.

After 60 days of such activity, the time had come: If the eggs would hatch, they would do so soon. Family members set up all-night watches, shooing ghost crabs and raking the sand smooth to better spot the first hatchling.

Days passed. Finally, at 76 days, specialists declared the watch over. The eggs would not hatch.

Later that day, when biologists Emily Gardner (Department of Land and Natural Resources) and George Balazs (National Marine Fisheries Service), dug up the 89 eggs, they discovered they were not fertile. Either the turtle was immature or she had not been able to find a mate.

This is not necessarily a bad end to the story. These thoughtful Lanai residents touched many lives with their turtle teachings and showed that the spirit of aloha reaches animals, too.

Hopefully, because of this extraordinary example, the next time a leatherback turtle visits our shores, she will be welcomed and loved with equal devotion.

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