

2/19/06 Honolulu Lite- Honolulu Star-Bulletin

"Turtles key suspects in UFO debate" by Charles Memminger

The following column has been rated PG-13 by the National Society of Busybodies Who Like to Rate Things. The PG-13 rating means that anyone under age 13 should not allow their parents to read this column, or at least offer parental guidance by pronouncing the difficult words for them. Be specifically warned that the "F" word will henceforth be used often and with unnecessary zeal. So those readers with delicate constitutions (or even delicate Magna Cartas) should avert their eyes because here comes that "F" word now:

Feces.

That's what we are talking about today. We will mainly be discussing turtle feces, but references to feces of other stripes necessarily will creep in. We will use the term "feces" because it sounds more sophisticated than its caustic cousin that starts with a "T" and rhymes with "bird."

Other publications are not so sensitive, such as New Scientist, which ran a story in 1993 with the headline "The Night of a Thousand (T-word That Rhymes with Bird)s."

This fascinating article disclosed that "For 40 days and 40 nights they just kept on coming. And four years later, marine biologists in Hawaii are still puzzling over the extraordinary summer when a tide of turtle (T-word)s washed up on a beach on the western side of Oahu."

Putting aside the fact that the flotilla of feces actually washed up on the northeastern side of Oahu, in Kaneohe Bay, to be exact, the incident does have a certain Alfred Hitchcockian feel to it. (A more tasteless journalist might suggest at this point an aquatic sequel to "The Birds," Hitchcock's seminal environmental cautionary tale.)

You might ask why we are discussing the turtle feces invasion that closed Kualoa Beach for 40 days in 1989 (which, by the way, remains not only a scientific mystery, but a turtle-feces beach-closing record). Go ahead. Ask.

The reason is that floating turtle feces in Kaneohe Bay has suddenly become a political issue 16 years later. You might recall that I disclosed last week a bill floating, so to speak, through the state

Legislature that, if passed, might severely restrict the recreational use of Ahu o Laka, a pristine stretch of reef and sand in the middle of Kaneohe Bay more commonly known as the Sand Bar.

Some people see the Sand Bar as an ancient sacred Hawaiian place and want it turned into a state monument. It also happens to be one of the most popular destinations for boaters and picnickers in Kaneohe Bay. There have been a few incidents of bad behavior, where rogue concerts have been staged resulting in overconsumption of beer and the occasional fight. But as I pointed out last week, those are rare occurrences, and most boaters and fishing enthusiasts treat the Sand Bar with respect. In fact, it's the boaters who keep the Sand Bar clean and safe, as I know, since I'm an FSBV (frequent Sand Bar visitor).

The strangest allegation by those wanting to pass a law restricting use of the Sand Bar is that human feces have been seen there, insinuating that Sand Bar users are crass enough to simply drop their drawers and defile this landmark. I knew this was BS (bull something-or-other) because most of the boats visiting the Sand Bar have bathroom facilities on board.

I referred to the feces as UFOs (unidentified floating objects) because there was a question of where they originated. A retired marine biologist friend of mine suggested they are probably turtle droppings because of the large number of green sea turtles that live in Kaneohe Bay.

I suspected a few readers scoffed at this. Which is why I was happy to hear from George Balazs, leader of the Marine Turtle Program at the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center. It was Balazs who actually investigated the 1989 turtle-feces invasion. In a 1993 paper he co-wrote for the Marine Pollution Bulletin, Balazs pointed out that the turtle feces were initially thought to either be of feral pig or human origin. That's why Kualoa Beach was closed, to make sure no one got sick from the possible human waste. But it turned out the UFOs were from turtles and posed no health risks.

At that time it was estimated that more than 500 turtles lived in Kaneohe Bay. There must be more today because the turtles remain a protected species. I see turtles just about every time I kayak in the bay.

The point is that before we turn Ahu o Laka into a state monument to keep humans from defecating there, maybe we'd better find out, as Darwin might say, "the origin of the species." Or at least the origin of the species feces. And I've got dibs on the screenplay.

Charles Memminger, the National Society of Newspaper Columnists' 2004
First Place Award winner for humor writing, appears Sundays, Tuesdays,
Thursdays and Fridays. E-mail cmemminger@starbulletin.com