

Fed may remove honu from "threatened" list

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Charles Kaaiai

Lance Smith

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WAIKIKI (HawaiiNewsNow) – The Hawaiian Green Turtle, or Honu, has recovered so well since being classified as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act in 1978 that its federal protection may be removed.

"The number of nesting females has multiplied several times over. I think there are at least five or six times more nesting females now than there were 40 years ago," said Lance Smith, Endangered Species Manager for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Honolulu.

NOAA is preparing a report on the status of the Hawaiian Green Turtle and the idea of removing the "threatened" classification was discussed at a Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council forum at the Elks Club in Waikiki Thursday night.

"If this big report that we're doing finds that the population has recovered, and if the report also finds that the threats are under control, then they will qualify for de-listing after a management plan is in place," said Lance Smith, Endangered Species Manager for NOAA in Honolulu.

That management plan might allow a limited number of turtles to be harvested for food. Select native Hawaiian groups hunted turtles as a food source for centuries and some want the legal right to harvest the honu again.

"They are beginning to eat the limu that's the foundation for all of our fisheries here," said Charles Kaaiai, indigenous program coordinator for the fishery council.

Kaaiai told Hawaii News Now our fisheries, other marine life, and the honu itself may benefit if a limited number of them are harvested. Both Kaaiai and Smith stress it would not be "open season" on turtles. They say the "threatened" classification would only be removed once a management plan is in place. That management plan would continue to ensure the survival of the species and include a transition of governance of the honu from federal to state government.

"It depends what the state wants to do after the federal protection is removed. There will be a five year period that's covered by the management plan that needs to be in place before the delisting can occur. At that point and during that process the fed becomes less involved and the state will have more control, so it depends on the state laws," Smith said.

Smith says commercial fishing of turtles is not being considered because that would certainly drive the turtle back toward extinction.

Kaaiai said some in the fishing community and some native Hawaiians favor a controlled take.

"The community is really saying we really need to manage the species because it's beginning to take the limu that we eat and it's beginning to reduce the population of the fishes that we depend on. So now they want a reexamination, What we're saying is if we remove them from the list, then we just can't remove them from the list and just let it go like that. We have to manage them," Kaaiai added.

There's no timetable for "de-listing" the turtle, but the process of examining the issue has begun.

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