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De-Listing the Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle?

Turtle Troubles... Over?: It's been illegal to hunt honu for decades. Some say it's been long enough.

SONNY GANADEN



PHOTO: COURTESY NOAA

In 1973, George Balazs was a junior marine biologist researching *chelonia mydas*, the Hawaiian green sea turtle, counting nesting females on the beaches of the French Frigate Shoals. "That first year, we only counted 67 of them," he recalls. With the population in steep decline and turtle meat and carapaces going for \$100 each on the open market, Hawaii's honu were in deep trouble.

Fortunately for them, the state enacted protections in 1974 and, in 1978, Hawaiian green sea turtles were added to the federal list of endangered species, making it illegal to hunt, injure or harass them. The result has been a rousing success. As any surfer could tell you, honu are now ubiquitous on local beaches. Balazs, who today is the head of the marine turtle research program at the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu, says his researchers counted 808 nesting females on the French Frigate Shoals this year. "All signs indicate that the turtle is well on its way to a healthy recovery," he says.

Federal and state protections have been so successful that there is talk of taking the honu off the federal endangered species list. The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council held a forum this summer to discuss the possibility of again harvesting the animals as a traditional Hawaiian food source.

It's far from a done deal and, if it does happen, don't expect an open season for hungry turtle hunters. The process of de-listing would simply transfer regulatory control of the species back to the state, at which point it's possible that fishermen could again receive licenses for sustainable harvesting, similar to the way other states monitor the hunting of nonendangered animals.

After a career advocating for the animals' protection, Balazs is open to the idea. "I once said all those years ago to the fishermen, when I was doing public testimony, that if the turtle population returns, I will speak in your favor. As a believer in native rights, I know there is an intimate bond between these animals and the culture that evolved with them."

What's the next step?

The process of de-listing a species can be initiated two ways. The first is an internal status review by NOAA, which would determine whether the local honu is genetically different from the global turtle diaspora, or a "distinct population segment" (something scientists don't know yet), and whether the species' recovery goals have been met. The second would be by a formal petition to NOAA, which can be filed by anyone.

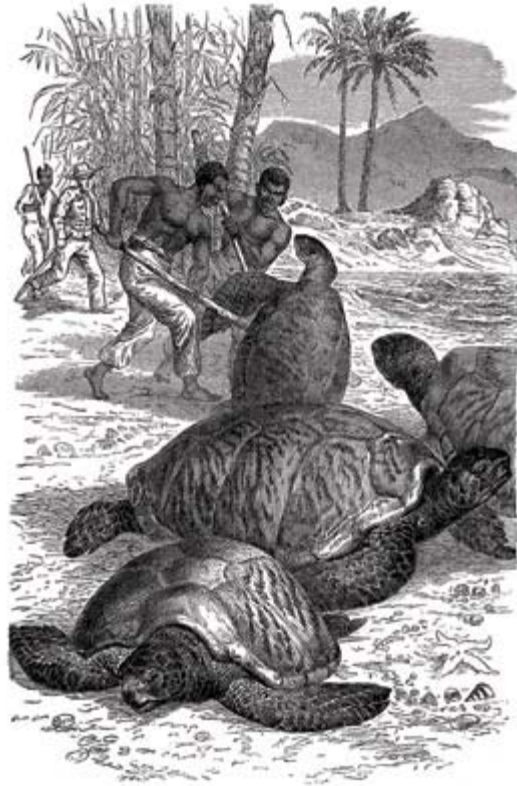


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"There have been some rumors, but we haven't received a petition, and the agency hasn't given this a hard look," says Lisa Van Atta, an assistant manager for the NOAA Fisheries Division. As Balazs explains, "It's a lot easier to put an animal on the list than it is to take it off."