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Turtle-cleaning station raises islander's spirits

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The surf is up. The water is murky. It's windy, rainy and cold. I'm not complaining — Hawaii winters have their own splendor.

But blustery conditions have been keeping me out of the ocean, and when that happens I get gloomy. Global warming, political gridlock, endless war, robot spy tunas (bit.ly/13dshbR). The world of my species overwhelms me.



Sea turtles are protected in Hawaii and have lost their fear of people.

Courtesy David Schrichte

Then a visitor helped put me right.

Friends called asking me to join them snorkeling because their California guest wanted to swim with turtles. What? Get wet? Oh, OK, I sighed. We met on the North Shore, pulled on wet-suit tops and took the plunge.

As I expected, the current was strong, the water chilly (77 degrees compared with summer's 81) and the visibility poor. As we swam to a place where honu hang out to have fish pick algae and parasites off their necks, flippers and shells, I wondered whether the turtles would even be there.

Oh, yes. Six big, fat turtles floated trancelike inside a curved coral wall, their heads down and limbs limp as convict tangs nibbled them clean. The surge pushed the turtles into each other in their crowded spa, and once, I had to back-paddle fast to keep two drifters from bumping into me.



Turtles at a North Shore cleaning station

Susan Scott

The turtles ignored us, not a bit concerned about four humans gawking and occasionally getting in the way.

Turtles are like that in Hawaii, where they've been protected for so long (since 1978) they've lost their fear of people. This is not so around other tropical islands.

I once visited a seaside hotel on the Tahitian island of Tahaa where the owner bought live turtles from anglers aiming to sell them at fish markets. The proprietor fed and nursed his reptile lodgers, and when the turtles were healthy, guests got to release them.

The encounter moved some to tears. A Tahitian woman told me she spent money she could not afford for airfare and a hotel room so her 8-year-old daughter could set a turtle free.



Turtle being released on Tahaa.

Susan Scott

I've now sailed twice across the South Pacific, and spotting a turtle is a rare event. And once a turtle spots you, it's gone in

a flash.

I love Hawaii’s turtles, and our tourists as well. People’s excitement over what we take for granted reminds me how lucky I am to live on Oahu. Nowhere else in the world can I, at any time, drop in on turtles grazing, resting or getting a massage, and the animals don’t consider me a predator.

Swimming with turtles on a Hawaii winter day didn’t solve the problems of the world, but it sure lifted my spirits. It also helped me believe that there’s hope for the future.

Have a happy honu holiday.

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