

Hawksbill turtles nesting at Punaluu

By Dave Smith
Tribune-Herald

Hawaiian hawksbill turtles are nesting again at Punaluu Beach.

It's been four years since a confirmed nesting at the Ka'u beach which is by far the busiest — in human terms — of known turtle nesting areas on the Big Island.

And that presents a challenge for those charged with protecting the endangered reptiles, which are believed to number less than 50.

Larry Katahira, a resource management specialist at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, said two nests were discovered recently on the north end of the beach after beach regulars reported seeing the tracks of the female turtle early in the morning.

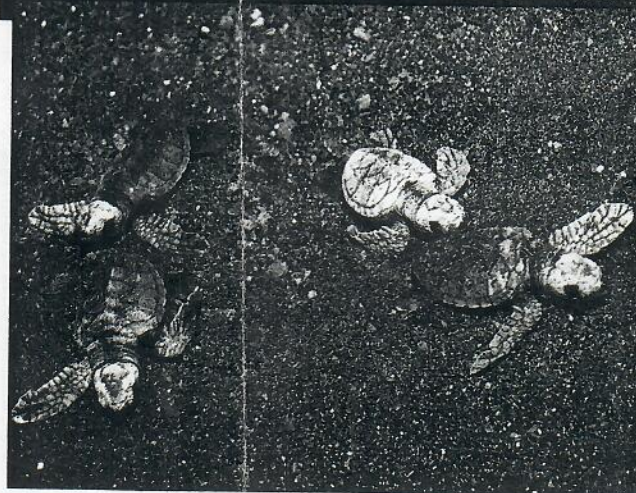
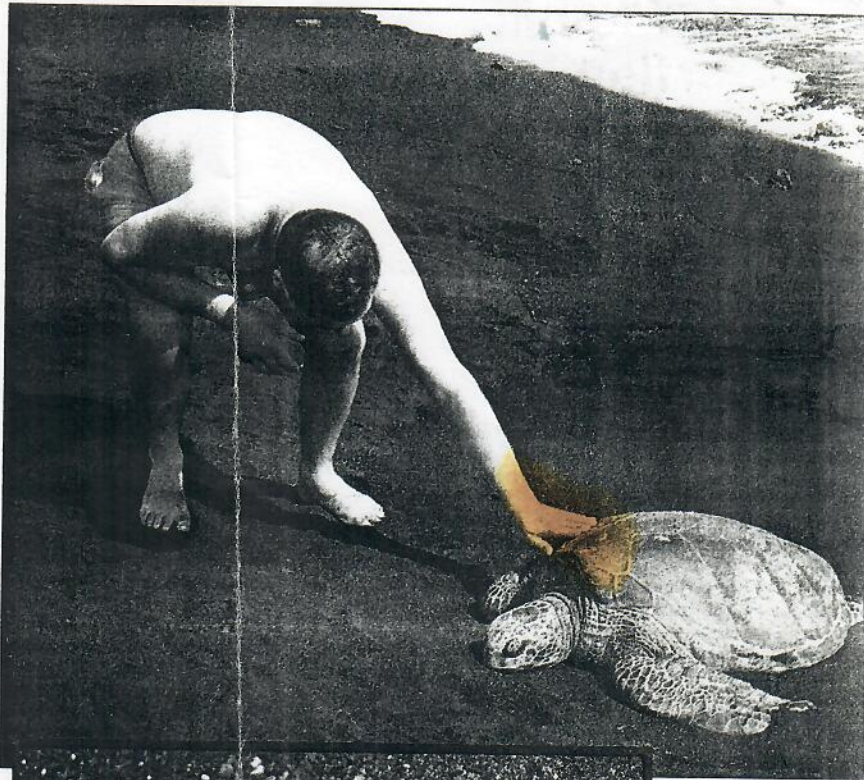
After a little digging, volunteers with the park's turtle monitoring program found the nests and erected fencing around them to warn people of their presence and to keep out predators such as mongooses and cats.

A third nest was discovered Tuesday night when 70 baby turtles dug their way out of the sand and headed for the ocean.

"No one knew it was there," Katahira said. Turtle volunteers are keeping an eye on that nest as more hatchlings are likely over the next several days, he said.

The last known nesting at Punaluu, the island's most acces-

See **TURTLES**,
Page 10



Baby hawksbill turtles, like those at left hatching at Kamehame in a Hawaii Volcanoes National Park file photo, were discovered crawling out of a nest at Punaluu Beach Tuesday night. Punaluu also provides basking territory for the Hawaiian green sea turtle, one of which is seen in the T-H photo above taken earlier this year at the popular Ka'u beach. Experts say human contact with either type of turtle should be avoided.

*Cover page!
— Not a great photo to display — with "Soaknote" about "avoiding contact" B*

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TURTLES: Hawksbill nests discovered at Punaluu

From Page 1

sible black-sand beach, was in 1995.

Last year hawksbills tried to nest at Punaluu but were apparently scared off by human activity, which includes motor vehicle traffic on a sandy road running along the beach from the nearby Punaluu Beach Park.

Humans and vehicles are not the only challenges facing the turtles' protectors. The area contains numerous lights, including a nearby street light that can confuse both the nesting turtle and her offspring, which depend on star light reflected off the water to guide them in their trip to the sea.

Katahira said in the case of hatchlings the confusion can be fatal because they have a limited amount of energy which is needed to get them into deep water and relative safety.

Even if they make it out into the ocean a baby turtle's life is fraught with peril and many won't make it to maturity and a chance to reproduce.

Punaluu is special in another way as it is one of the few places where hawksbill turtles mingle — albeit briefly — with their cousin the green sea turtle.

Over the past five years green sea turtles have begun to crawl out on Punaluu's black-sand beach to bask for periods ranging from minutes to 15 hours. Scientists don't know the reason for the basking but say it has nothing to do with reproduction as green sea turtles nest only in the leeward part of the Hawaiian island chain.

However, the contact is probably brief, consisting of the mother turtle

crawling past to find a suitable nesting spot and, about 63 days later, the hatchlings furiously clawing their way down the sand to their new ocean home.

Katahira said there could well be additional hawksbill nests at Punaluu.

Hawksbill turtles, who return to nest every second or third year, crawl up onto the beach at night, usually seeking out sandy areas underneath nāupaka, a common beach bush. After scooping out a hole, they lay an average of 125 leathery eggs which they cover with sand before returning to the ocean.

The hawksbill will often repeat that labor several times about two weeks apart during the nesting season that runs from May to December.

Kamehame, a beach about two

miles north of Punaluu, is the most common hawksbill nesting site and volunteers found 26 nests last year. Two more were located at Apua Point and two more at Halape, both of which are located inside the national park.

Nesting also occurs at Kealahou, just north of Halape, at Kawaiahae, south of Punaluu and at Pohue. Volunteers recently attached tags to two nesting turtles, the first of which was tagged at the beach north of Saddle Point.

Katahira's advice for anyone who discovers nesting activity is to not disturb the nest or hatchlings and to notify park officials.

He said the park is still seeking volunteers for the monitoring program. Interested persons can call the park at 985-6090.