



OCEAN WATCH

By Susan Scott



Turtles here are losing fear of humans

A friend told me recently that about a month ago, while visiting the North Shore, he saw several big sea turtles grazing on seaweed in 2 to 3 feet of water. These 300-pound turtles looked healthy and seemed relaxed, even though people were standing in the water, petting and feeding them.

Yes, it's illegal to touch a sea turtle and feeding them is a no-no. But these turtle laws were created to prevent harassment of these gentle creatures, and this was a far cry from that. It was an act of love.

You see, the turtles had come into the shallow water to eat the abundant seaweed growing there. But due to low surf and shifting sands, some of the best seaweed was out of reach of the turtles' bulky bodies. Therefore, people were picking bundles of the stuff and handing it to the hungry reptiles.

Everyone was thrilled by this marvelous event, including the turtles. Rather than fleeing from the people, they calmly munched the offered food.

THIS story is the embodiment of some good news about Hawaii's green turtles, or honu: Twenty years after becoming protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, the Hawaii native is showing promising signs of recovery. The number of nesting females is gradually increasing, more and more turtles are grazing around the main Hawaiian islands and researchers have been documenting changes in their behavior.

The most striking change in turtle conduct in Hawaii is the time juveniles and adolescents eat. Before the mid-1980s, turtles rarely grazed during the

Today, however, turtles feeding in human-populated waters during the day are a common sight. And they're doing it in new places. Greens are showing up in areas with no prior records of turtles. One such place is Honaunau, the national park on the Kona coast of Hawaii. I was there recently and counted eight dinner-plate-sized turtles grazing in just inches of water.

Researchers believe that this daytime feeding is closely related to the other recent behavior change in young turtles: tolerance to humans.

IN the past, most green turtles fled at the first sight of humans. This still happens among some individuals but it's no longer the norm at many feeding sites.

These days, turtles often hold their ground in the presence of people. In some places, turtles are essentially tame, foraging for seaweed near the feet of people standing in the water. At other sites, even when there is no history of hand-feeding, turtles are swimming right up to divers.

This relatively new tameness, plus daytime foraging in human-populated areas, has added turtle-watching as a major activity on and in Hawaii's waters.

It's heartwarming that Hawaii's turtles are becoming less afraid of us. But there's a downside to this. As more turtles come inshore to feed, more swallow hooks and get tangled in fishing lines and nets.

Anglers can help Hawaii's turtles by not fishing in areas where turtles regularly feed. If a turtle does get hooked, don't try to remove it. Cut the line close, or in complicated cases, call 983-5730 on weekdays, 587-0077 on weekends.

My friend who saw people and the North Shore turtles interacting was quite moved by the experience.

"Something wonderful and beautiful is happening," he said.

So true. Let's work together to keep it happening.

Susan Scott's Ocean Watch column appears Mondays in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. Contact her at honu@aloha.net.