



Splash!

by Robert Duerr

Green Turtle Take: Crime or Kau Kau?

■ On Maui, a father and son who were lobster fishing were arrested for the crime of “take and possession” of a honu (Hawaiian green sea turtle, *Chelonia mydas*), a protected species. Turtle scientists, however, say what beach-goers observe, that the Hawaiian green sea turtle population has recovered. Should taking a green sea turtle be a crime for the police blotter, or should green sea turtles be food for the dinner table?

On a Sunday at 6:50 a.m., a DOCARE officer on routine patrol reported seeing two men pulling their lobster net from Round Tables in the Waiehu area of Maui’s north shore. The officer found a dead honu entangled in a net placed in a metal tub.

George Harvey Balazs, self-described as “global independent sea turtle scientist,” has professionally and personally been involved in the research and conservation of marine turtles in the Hawaiian Islands, Oceania and globally since 1972. He has worked for organizations including the University of Hawai‘i and the National Marine Fisheries Service, and he has been a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group since 1976. He was co-chair of the Oceania Region of the IUCN group. In short, he is a world-recognized honu expert who has lived in the Hawaiian Islands for more than 50 years.

George went on the record in 2012 and again in 2016 to comment on the NOAA endangered and threatened rule-making process. His testimony stated:

“I attest to the following direct personal observations, submitted here as testimony based on a significant span of time—nearly 48 years—1965 to 2012—living in Hawai‘i and devoting attention, as an astute observer in, on, and by the ocean. During the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s it was uncommon to ever see green turtles when snorkeling, scuba diving, boating, or walking along the shoreline. Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s sightings of turtles increased prominently—including the occurrence of terrestrial basking. By the mid-1990s through to the present, with increasing frequency, it has become ‘common’ to see turtles.

“My observations are applicable to the Hawaiian islands of O‘ahu, where I live, as well as Maui, Kaua‘i, Lana‘i, Moloka‘i and the Big Island of Hawai‘i (including East Hawai‘i and the Kohala/Kona Coast). By green turtles being ‘common’ I mean widespread, general, ordinary, of frequent occurrence, and usual.”

Surfers at Honolūi Beach Park hit turtles with skegs with regularity, sometimes multiple times in a session. Seemingly, NOAA does not disagree with surfers that there are more green sea turtles in Hawai‘i. The problem is that the population nests almost exclusively in the French Frigate Shoals, which NOAA is concerned will disappear with climate change.

NOAA and NMFS relied on a 2015 document by Jeffrey A. Seminoff, et al., titled “Status Review of the Green Turtle Under the Endangered Species Act” for their DPS (distinct population segment) 1 (North Atlantic), DPS 7 (Central West Pacific) and DPS 9 (Central South Pacific) rule-making support for protecting turtles. Though George was a co-author of this report, he had no involvement in the protection requests. George told NOAA that climate change induced sea level rise, hence eventual submergence of nesting beaches at French Frigate Shoals, “runs oppositional to the fact that green turtles are highly resilient and adaptable resulting in short- and long-term successful nesting beach and other changes for millennia.”

George continued, “The rationale simply ‘does not hold water’ in that no science-based information of support was presented in the rule-making proposal.”

Meanwhile, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (the Council) recently heard a report on the status of the management in Hawai‘i of the honu. With the abundance of turtles, the Council has received numerous fisherfolk requests to allow the traditional cultural harvest of green sea turtles for food, medicine and sustenance.

Manny Duenas, Council member from Guam, “expressed deep concern at the erosion of respect for indigenous cultures in our region, where turtles have been valued for medicine, food and sustenance for more than 4,000 years.”

George wrote in 2014, “Successful sea turtle conservation programs that endure are best built with local communities as their foundation.”

The Council will work with communities to document “the history of cultural harvest and use of honu in Hawai‘i.” Council members also supported developing a way forward with the NMFS.

“The scientifically sound and appropriate listing of sea turtle populations is too much of a fundamental issue for conservationists to leave to emotion and political correctness,” George stated in an E-mail to “Splash!”

Meanwhile, the two men have a court date scheduled for November 18 in Maui District Court. George has taken notice of the case and wrote the following in the comment section of a Maui News article on the case: “I’ve taken an interest in this case. It has some curiosities about it based on my 50 years of professional and personal experiences with honu in Hawai‘i. Something seems amiss, although maybe that’s due to limited reporting of the full facts. If anyone knows the defendants, or the attorney that will represent them in court in November, please ask them to contact me.”

Visit George Balazs’ website at <<https://georgebalazs.com/#>>.

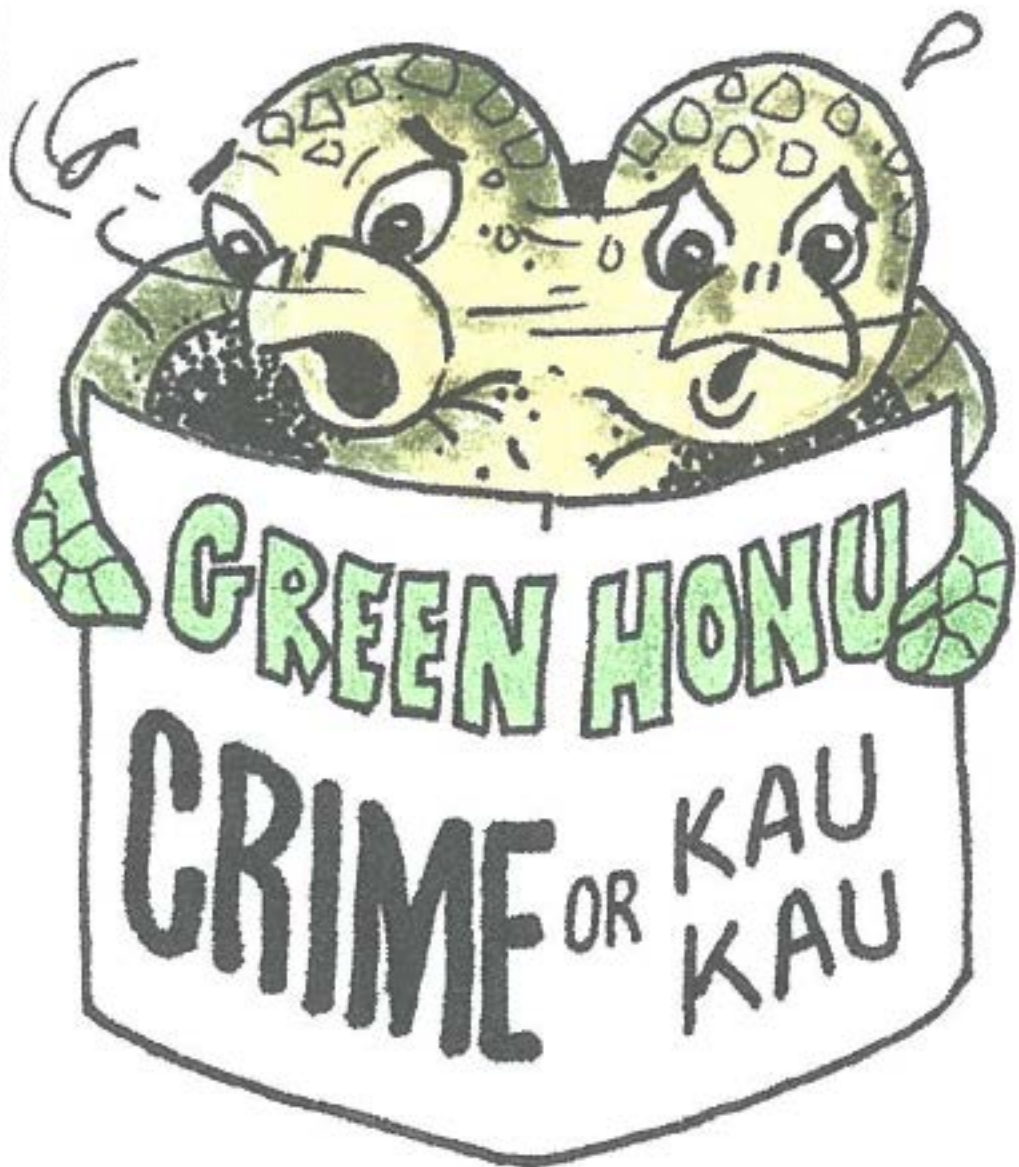
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Turtle killed in lobster net on Maui. Photo courtesy of DLNR.



Oama fishing at Liliuokalani Park, Hilo. Photo courtesy of Robert Duerr.



GREEN HONU

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