

attach news clipping

date of vessel sinking?

21 AUGUST, 1979

MR. G. H. BALAZS, Assistant Marine Biologist
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P.O. BOX 1346, Coconut Island,
KANAEHE, HAWAII.

Dear Mr. Balazs:

Your letter dated 7 August, directed to Sarah Miller has been given to me with a request that I answer your query about the marine life observed by our crew during our recent "st-trip" north-west of the Hawaiian chain of islands.

On the 6th day adrift we observed, for a few minutes, a large Green turtle - he was gracefully making about 2 knots in a westerly direction - with the current. The position was approximately 33° 58' N, 175° 20' W. He was a beautiful creature, male (longtail) measuring about 2' 6" across the shell. It was early in the morning, and I wondered if he might travel at a greater depth during the heat of the day?. This was the only turtle seen by our group during the eight days adrift. At this point we were definitely in the north equatorial current. The trades were blowing sporadically from calm to 30 kts and out of the east.

With regard to sharks - we had what I thought to be a large number of visits during the trip! When we were fighting the fire on 'White Eagle' I noted a group of White-tipped sharks - possibly 8 in number - keeping track of our efforts! They were

not 'surfacing' but were staying about 2 fathoms down. The largest was not more than 7 or 8 feet in length. (I did not mention anything about them to my mates, but made sure that when we abandoned ship - no one jumped into the water.) I assume it was this same group that stayed with us during that first night adrift and until about 1000 the next day. During the night they came to the surface and several of them made repeated sorties to our rafts - rubbing against the rubber - trying to figure out what we were I suppose. The only day that I did not see a shark was on a very calm day. The rafts were not making much of a commotion and I guess that this lack of action plus the surface water temperature being quite warm were the reasons. On the 5th night on my watch a large Mako shark visited our flotilla. He gave our raft a good bump and the force of it dumped me headlong into the raft. (The correct direction!) I tried to gauge his size over the next hour and my conclusion was that he measured a good 10-12 feet. A most formidable creature. On the day of the turtle sighting I noted only 2 small white fin sharks during the entire day.

When we got into the North Equatorial current on the night of the 2nd day there was a noticeable increase in sea life. We had large schools of yellow-fin tuna busily chasing flying fish, and many dorados with their beautiful colored flashing bodies with us. The dorados remained at 20'-30' below the surface for the most part and were not in the least interested in our phoney lures! Unfortunately for us.

We had a small number of black & white vertically striped pilot fish with our rafts constantly. The only fish we managed to catch were in several small schools (20-50 per group). They were not interested in lures so we made 'jiggers' and managed in this manner to catch a total of 3 fish before they caught on to our devious method.... I could not identify these fish, and have not yet found their species in books here in Vancouver. I called them "sea-treat". In length they did not measure more than 12". They resembled a brook-treat in shape. Skin a blue-spotted grey except for a prominent yellow stripe running from head to tail along with yellow fins and tail. They were sweet and tender and our birds enjoyed them very much.


When it was calm it was interesting to note the plankton density. It is quite amazing to see so much life - so close. (It is good food too - but not really the most flavorful stuff). At the most dense occurrence I would say that there was an organism every 6 inches - from the surface to approximately 1 fathom down. It might have been deeper but the motion plus the transparent nature of the creatures made useful vision impossible beyond a few feet in depth.

We saw only 2 whales in the eight days but I was unable to distinguish clearly their shapes so I'm not sure of the species.

We had constant contact with small erols. They were a blue-grey in color and never more than 1 1/4" across the shell. The fish did not accept them as bait so I assumed they were of a poisonous nature, and

assumed further that perhaps this was the reason for their being around at all - otherwise they should have been nice bite-size morsels for many creatures. Because of these observations I did not let the crew eat these crabs. I would be most interested to learn about these crabs and know whether or not we were missing an important, easily caught food supply?...

Well - that's about it - but getting back to that turtle again - the current was about 1 knot and he was moving with it. His spud over the bottom would have been about 3 to 3.5 kts. My impression was that he was definitely "steaming" somewhere. In May, 1975, northwest of the Galapagos Archipelago I observed many turtles in similar currents. They were always quite erratic in their courses and so I guessed that they were feeding. They tended to swim into the current and concentrate on "rip" areas. Perhaps the feed was good and in enough concentration to hold the turtles in and around a given area.

By the way - our vessel sank at $35^{\circ}40'N$ $174^{\circ}55'W$ and from there we drifted S.E. for 2 days until we encountered the North equatorial current. Then we moved SW x W to a point $33^{\circ}55'N$ x $175^{\circ}30'W$ where we were rescued by the Soviet Whaler. We averaged 27 miles per day. Our course was 



I would assume the enclosed information would be of very little value to yourself but I have enjoyed writing about it because I love so much the residents of the water and the birds that live in such a nicely balanced way with them.

Best Regards.

Jon P. van Tamele

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Note - F/V FINBACK
sighted "green turtle" at
about 32°N, 177°W during
late August or early Sept.
(as per Naftel)