

## Here in Hawaii

# Last Outpost for the Green Turtle

By Helen Altonn  
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Hawaii has the largest and last remaining colony of green sea turtles in the United States — and the responsibility of safeguarding it, says George H. Balazs, University of Hawaii marine biologist.

It's the only green sea turtle colony in the world that can be protected and managed under a single government's jurisdiction at both the feeding and breeding grounds, he points out.

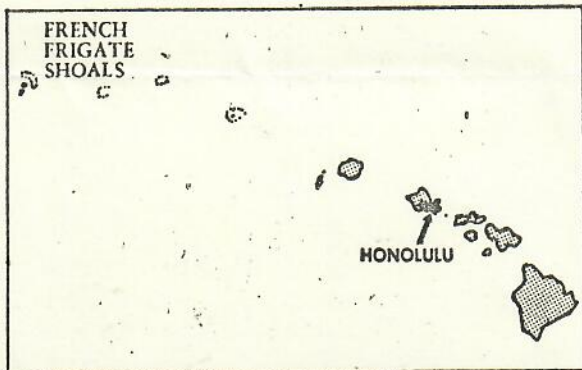
Balazs, of the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, has done extensive research on turtles and has led a movement to save them from commercial exploitation.

THE STATE Division of Fish and Game now proposes such a regulation. Public hearings were held Sept. 21 and the division is accepting testimony concerning the measure through Saturday.

Michio Takata, division chief, said he has already received a "mountainous amount" of testimony, mostly favoring the regulation.

The opponents primarily are the commercial turtle harvesters. (Only six persons in the State hunted turtles for profit last year, according to Balazs. The most anyone earned was \$5,003.)

Takata said the regulation will be presented to the Animal Species Advisory Commission at a meeting Oct. 12 on Kauai. Then it must go to the State Board of Land and Natural Resources for approval.



**TURTLE TRANSPLANT** — George Balazs displays a batch of turtle hatchlings brought from French Frigate Shoals for rearing at Coconut Island. — Staff photo by Warren R. Roll.

THE REGULATION will be ready for board consideration either at its Oct. 26 or Nov. 9 meeting, Takata said.

The regulation would prohibit the sale of any

leatherback, hawksbill or green sea turtles or any parts of them — thus abolishing turtle steaks from restaurant menus and use of turtles for curio and jewelry items.

Green sea turtles could be taken for home consumption if their upper shell length was 36 inches or more. But use of nets to capture turtles would be unlawful.

Violations would be punishable with a fine of \$100 or imprisonment of up to 30 days.

BALAZS explains in his testimony on the regulation that the hawksbill and leatherback turtles are on the endangered species list and the green turtle is listed as "depleted" throughout the world.

He says the only nesting site left for Hawaii's green sea turtles is at French Frigate Shoals, about 480 miles west-northwest of Honolulu.

In recent studies of the nesting areas, he found the green turtle population to be under 1,100. He said this is a drastic drop from a 1968 estimate which placed the population between 2,600 to 5,200.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife personnel have shown by tagging turtles that they migrate from French Frigate Shoals to the major Hawaiian Islands.

"IT CAN therefore be concluded that French Frigate Shoals is the only remaining breeding grounds for the feeding population which inhabits Hawaii's major Islands," Balazs said.

The breeding grounds are federally protected as the National Wildlife Refuge. But there is no protection for the feeding areas in the main Hawaiian Islands, Balazs said, adding:

"Any turtle colony with a total breeding population of only slightly less than 1,100 that is being subjected to increasing commer-



**HAWAIIAN WILDLIFE** — Green sea turtles bask peacefully in the sun with Hawaiian monk seals and birds at French Frigate Shoals in the northwestern islands of the Hawaiian archipelago. Note the large albatross "chick" in the water. It had just taken off — learning to fly. That's as far as it got. — Photo by George Balazs.

...ial exploitation is most definitely in an insecure position."

He attributed "extremely large" increases in pounds of turtle caught over the past 10 years to the increase in tourism, with the incentive coming from restaurants and hotels.

"IF THIS is the case, it then logically follows that a few fishermen are erod-

ing a unique Hawaiian resource to provide an exotic luxury food for short-term Mainland visitors," Balazs said.

"It is unfortunate that those to suffer the most from this practice will be the low-income, less fortunate residents of Hawaii. The turtle that could have been captured for home use to provide additional meat will now be all the more difficult to find."

Balazs appeals to restaurants to support the ban on sale of turtle meat.

"Replace the turtle on your menu with other equally attractive and exotic luxury foods, such as our locally grown Malaysian prawns," he suggested.

"HELP SUPPORT our studies so that one day you may again serve turtle steak — steak that is ob-

tained from domestically raised animals specifically for this purpose."

Balazs said Archie Carr, the world's foremost authority on marine turtles, told him he would like to see a moratorium on taking of all sea turtles from Hawaiian waters until a careful survey of breeding, feeding and basking populations can be made.

The State House of Representatives has passed a

bill sponsored by Rep. Anson Chong which would provide funds to conduct such research. The measure is pending in the Senate, Balazs said.