

# Hawksbill turtles make comeback in Hawaii waters

□ The threatened species takes years to reproduce

By Rod Thompson  
Big Island correspondent

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**H**ILO — Hawksbill turtles have begun returning to the beaches of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park for their annual nesting season.

But don't run right over to take a look.

People are bad news for nesting turtles and there are awfully few hawksbills to begin with.

"They're one of the most endangered marine turtles in the world," said park resource specialist Larry Katahira.

Not more than 12 per year nest in Hawaii, at five nesting sites on the Big Island and one on Molokai.

Because a female nests only every second or third year, the 12 or so seen in one year may mean a total of no more than 24 females in Hawaiian waters, Katahira said.

See **TURTLES**, Page A-6



## Hawksbill turtle

Endangered species

- **Numbers:** About 12 nest in Hawaii, most at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Four other sites on the Big Island. A few nests also are found on Molokai.
- **Elsewhere:** Only other U.S. nesting site is in Florida, but they haven't been spotted there for years.
- **Warning:** Avoid nesting areas, particularly at night. Also, lights disorient the turtles.

## Inside

- Hawaiian green sea turtles will be carrying computer identification chips under their skin. **Page A-6**



## TURTLES: Rare species making slow comeback

Continued from Page A-1

Despite their rarity, hawksbills are well known indirectly. They are the source of "tortoise shell" jewelry. Killing the turtles or importing jewelry is banned by the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Violators are subject to a year in prison and \$20,000 in fines.

The turtles are worthless for their meat, which tastes bad and can even be poisonous.

The national park began paying more attention to protecting the turtles about four years ago, Katahira said. Thousands were being killed in the Philippines and exported to Japan for jewelry.

In Florida, the only other place in the United States where the hawksbills nest, they haven't been seen for several years.

So the recent discovery of new nests at a remote beach in the park was good news.

But the beach is bad because of a rocky barrier between the water and the sand. Mother turtles can climb over the rocks, but hatchlings trying to get to the sea get hung up in the rocks, dry out in the sun, and die.

Park personnel have to be there during the nighttime hatchings to help them into the water.

Camp fires and flashlights disorient the turtles, Katahira said. At Halape, where the last turtle was seen in 1989, a female apparently went off course because of a camp fire, fell into a crack, and died. She had 300 eggs inside her.

At the popular swimming beach at Punaluu, south of the park, a roadway is regularly graded on top of the sandy beach. Turtles have tried to scratch nests in the road. Katahira is going to suggest that the community allow the natural buildup of soft sand to cover the road.

At nearby Kamehame, as at other sites, mongooses are a threat to turtle eggs.

"They just dig them up and have a big luau," Katahira said.

Kamehame is also inside the proposed Palima Point rocket launch area. The park has opposed the launch site since 1988.



By Rod Thompson, Star-Bulletin

Ben Saluda, environmental education coordinator at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, shows illegal products made from hawkbill turtle shell.

## Green sea turtles have chips on their shoulders

□ Ten of the rare creatures will be liberated on July 4

By Rod Thompson  
Big Island correspondent

**K**OHALA COAST, Hawaii — While hawkbill turtles are so rare they're seldom seen, Hawaiian green sea turtles, their more common cousins, are going high-tech.

About 10 of the green turtles will be released on the beach at Mauna Lani Resort on the Fourth of July — the resort calls it Turtle Independence Day — and all of them will be carrying computer identification chips under their skin.

The chips are so small that they are put into the turtles with hypodermic needles, according to the resort. The chips have no power supply of their own but respond when a hand-held detector is passed over the animals.

Hawaiian green sea turtles are

classified as threatened, not as rare as the endangered hawkbill turtles but still rare enough to be protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

That protection makes it illegal to have them in captivity, but Sea Life Park is exempt because it had them before the law was passed.

The park lets most of its new hatchlings free into the sea every year, but most of them get eaten by birds and fish. The park keeps a few until they're about 2 feet long and better able to handle the open ocean.

Unlike the hawksbills, which nest in various places on the main Hawaiian Islands, the green turtles nest mostly in the leeward islands, especially French Frigate Shoals, said George Balazs, the National Marine Fisheries official who put the chips in the turtles.

If green turtles hatched on Oahu are released at the Big Island, where will they nest? No one knows, but the chips will help researchers keep track when the turtles reach sexual maturity, 20 to 25 years from now, he said.