

# 'Turtle Independence Day'

## July 4 at Mauna Lani 1995

Since 1990, July 4 has been known affectionately as "Turtle Independence Day" at Mauna Lani Resort. The tradition will continue this year when 10 young honu — Hawaiian green sea turtles — are released into the ocean to begin life on their own in the wild.

Mauna Lani's annual celebration is most fitting this year, as recently the Hawaii State Legislature passed a resolution joining Hawaii with 25 Pacific island nations and territories in declaring 1995 the "Year of the Sea Turtle."

The sea turtle population is under threat of extinction due to over-harvesting, and it is the goal of the Regional Marine Turtle Conservation Programme to promote education and awareness of the need for turtle conservation. Mauna Lani's six-year-old turtle program greatly complements the RMTCP's efforts to provide this awareness, according to resort officials.

Since the inception of "Turtle Independence Day," nearly 60 endangered green sea turtles have been tagged and released into the ocean fronting the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel. The event is open to the public, and is attended by hotel guests, Hawaii residents, and resort staff.

The turtles are part of an ongoing educational and experimental species restoration program of Sea Life Park Hawaii. Mauna Lani participates in the program by providing a temporary home for the young green sea turtles until they grow large enough to be released.

"Mauna Lani's willingness to continue participation in our program proves the resort's genuine concern for the welfare of this engaging creature. It's wonderful for Sea Life Park because it's an extension of our turtle program — it brings a piece of Sea Life Park to the Big Island," states Mark Rausch, director of education at Sea Life Park Hawaii.

"Turtle Independence Day provides the community a chance to see a turtle up close, to gain a better understanding of the plight of the green sea turtle and what can be done to help preserve this endangered species. It's great to see the reaction and happiness in the faces of the guests and visitors as they watch the turtles being released," continued Rausch.

The public is invited to attend a host of turtle activities surrounding "Turtle Independence Day." Pre-release activities on July 3 include the turtle weigh-in, measuring, and selection process performed by Sea Life Park and Mauna Lani's turtle caretaking staff. Educational programs will be offered at The Ritz-Carlton, Mauna Lani and Mauna Lani Bay Hotel on July 2 and July 3, respectively.

On July 4, at 7:30 a.m., Mauna Lani will host a 10K "Turtle Run." Proceeds from the run will benefit the Sea Life Park Marine Research and Education Foundation, a non-profit organization to further marine research and education opportunities for protected species and injured or stranded animals. For more information on the "Turtle Run," contact Mauna Lani Bay Hotel at 885-6622.

"Turtle Independence Day" activities continue on July 4 at 10 a.m. Children will participate in turtle sand rubbings, the blowing of turtle bubbles, and a colorful parade as the turtles are escorted to the ocean's edge to await their release. Sea Life Park also will make an educational presentation — including a turtle eggshell and embryo — to the children of Mauna Lani School, the resort's on-property child care facility.

To ready the turtles for their release, high technology PIT (Passive Integrated Transponder) tags are placed in the turtles by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) biologist George Balazs. "The PIT tags permit rapid detection and identification of tagged animals," explains Balazs. "Each tag is essentially a

Since 1990, July 4 has been known affectionately as "Turtle Independence Day" at Mauna Lani Resort. The tradition will continue this year when 10 young honu — Hawaiian green sea turtles — are released into the ocean to begin life on their own in the wild.

icantly decreased the population of the world sea turtle population, thus the threat of extinction.

A small number of hatchlings

are retained by Sea Life Park Hawaii for the species restoration project with Mauna Lani Resort. Although countless hatchlings still await these juveniles, headstarting gives them the advantage of being much larger and less likely prey than they

would be as hatchlings.

For concerns or more information on what you can do to help, contact the Pacific Area

Office of NMFS at (808) 973-2937 or the Sea Life Park Marine Research/Education Foundation at (808) 259-6476.

small computer chip embedded in a sterile pyrex glass capsule. They're hypodermically implanted — similar to a human getting a vaccination." Balazs has been using the PIT tags in NMFS's wild sea turtle tagging program for almost three years.

"The identification of individual animals is essential to accurate wildlife studies," Balazs says. "If we're ever going to know where turtles live and where they're going, we have to identify them as individuals."

Sea Life Park's green sea turtle breeding stock was grandfathered in as exempt from the U.S. Endangered Species Act which prohibits keeping the animals in captivity. Each year, the marine wildlife park releases most of its tiny hatchlings into the wild within hours of being hatched. As few as one in 1,000 sea turtles may survive to adulthood. Young sea turtles have many natural predators: crabs, birds, fish and sharks. Humans, however, pose the largest threat to adult turtles. Commercial harvest of turtle meat and skins, poaching of turtle eggs, subsis-