



SEA LIFE PARK HAWAII

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Sea Life Park Hawaii has maintained the only captive breeding program in the United States for the giant green sea turtle. Under the U. S. Endangered Species Act of 1973, the turtles were listed as a threatened species and it was no longer lawful to capture the animals or harm them in any way.

At Sea Life Park, more than 1,700 turtles have been hatched since 1976, and all of them are released into Hawaiian waters.

For Steve Kaiser, the Sea Life Park's Curator of Reptiles and Fishes, releasing the turtles brings him mixed emotions. "It's like sending a child to college," explained Kaiser. "You're glad to see them go off on their own but you're still worried about if they'll make it."

Therefore, when he recently received news from the National Marine Fisheries Service that one of the turtles the park hatched then released as a hatchling in 1989 was spotted in April on the Big Island, Kaiser was understandably elated. "In 1989, he was 1 1/2 inches long and when he was recaptured at Keauhou Bay, he was 14 1/2 inches long," explained Kaiser.

Tagged with a National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) number E622, the turtle was spotted on April 22 by George Balazs of NMFS Marine Turtle Research Program who was able to verify that the animal was indeed one of the turtles who once resided at Sea Life Park Hawaii. Balazs made sure the turtle was in good health, retagged him with a new number, and promptly released the animal.

In Hawaii, only 100 to 350 green sea turtles nest each year in the wild, mainly at French Frigate

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Shoals 400 miles northwest of Kauai. Commercial hunting and human encroachment have been significant factors in their decrease in population over the years. A hatchling which measures only about 1 or 2 inches and weighs as little as an ounce is ready prey for predators.

This fourth of July, the park hopes to release ten juvenile turtles at the Mauna Lani Resort. "Our turtles are given only the best accommodations," Kaiser laughed.

For the past three years, the park has been releasing turtles with much local fanfare at Mauna Lani where atrium ponds are maintained for the threatened species in preparation for their release into the wild. "We get several hundred people from the Big Island community," stated Leilani S. Hino, the Director of Community Affairs at Mauna Lani Resort who has organized the resort's "Turtle Independence Day" for the past three years. "It is one of our favorites," added Lino. "It is a total feel-good thing."

On July 3, Kaiser will weigh and measure the turtles at Mauna Lani Bay, making sure all turtles are in top shape before they venture out into the wild. Turtles who pass this test are then tagged with identifying markers from the NMFS. In 1990, the park released four turtles at the resort. In 1991, six were released. This year, the park hopes to release a total of ten turtles about one to two years old.

As part of their on-going efforts to conserve the green sea turtle species --or *Chelonia mydas*, Sea Life Park has also loaned out the reptiles to several animal facilities throughout North America. "Some of the hatchlings are loaned to parks for display to educate the public about sea turtle conservation," explained Kaiser. "This gives the turtles time to grow prior to their release," he continued.

Vancouver Aquarium, Columbus Zoo, Cleveland Metro Zoo, Bronx Zoo, Seattle Aquarium, Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco as well as Kahala Hilton and Waikiki Aquarium have all participated in the Educational Loan Program created by the park. "We feel by placing as many as possible with other institutions the turtles serve as living ambassadors of their species and thus increase the public's awareness about the need to ensure their survival," Kaiser explained.

At full maturity which in the wild takes an average of 25 years, the green sea turtle can weigh up to 400 pounds and live to a ripe old age. The green sea turtle can be seen at the park's Turtle Lagoon from 9:30 a. m. to 5:00 p. m. daily.