

Mauna Lani celebrates 'Turtle Independence Day'



Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows general manager Charles Park, left, and Steve Kaiser, director of facilities development at Sea Life Park Hawaii. Photo by Bob Fewell

By Chuck Davis

Hawaii's visitor industry and its environmental movement joined forces July 4 when 10 green sea turtles celebrated Independence Day by being reintroduced to the ocean in waters fronting the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows.

The Big Island resort, in cooperation with Sea Life Park Hawaii, reared the turtles to adolescence in its saltwater atrium ponds.

The third annual event brought to 24 the number of turtles released at the Kohala Coast hotel. Each turtle has been tagged for research as part of Sea Life Park's experimental species-restoration program.

"It seems like the Big Island is a good place to get our turtles going," said Steve Kaiser, facilities director at Sea Life Park.

"The National Marine Fisheries Service has captured a couple of the Mauna Lani juveniles we released there, so apparently

they're sticking around," he said.

Daniel "Kaniela" Akaka Jr., Mauna Lani's Hawaiian specialist and historian, and son of the U.S. senator, said the program not only helps the turtles' survival chances but is an attraction for hotel guests and an educational tool for school children.

Sen. Daniel Akaka participated in this year's release, along with Mauna Lani Resort president Max Yuki and general manager Charles Park.

The release program at Mauna Lani is designed to nurture a small number of the young to adolescence so they can be safely released into the ocean. As larger animals, juveniles are less likely prey than hatchlings.

The turtles are 12 to 24 months old when they arrive at Mauna Lani's ponds, and are nurtured for about a year before release. Caring for the turtles costs about \$6,000 per year plus approximately 4,000 man-hours.

Sea Life program hopes to save turtles

Green sea turtles are set free near Mauna Lani resort

By **JAMES GONSER**
Managing Editor

MAKAPUU — About 500 people were on hand July 4 to watch as 12 Hawaii green sea turtles left captivity for the first time and swam away into the open ocean.

Steve Kaiser, director of facilities development at Sea Life Park, hopes the young turtles and others raised by the park will become living ambassadors for their species, educating people not to hunt, kill or buy turtle products so the reptile will not become extinct.

"We are trying to do a similar thing to what has been done in the ivory trade, educate people that if you buy ivory, there won't be a lot of elephants around," Kaiser said. "We want to use the little turtles to educate people. You would be surprised how many people don't know that it is illegal to bring those products into the United States. We want to get rid of the market for turtle products."

This was the third annual release of endangered green sea turtles that so far has placed 26 two-year-old turtles into the waters off the Mauna Lani Resort on the Kohala coast of the Big Island.

Sea Life Park has a breeding herd of pre-endangered species sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in the turtle

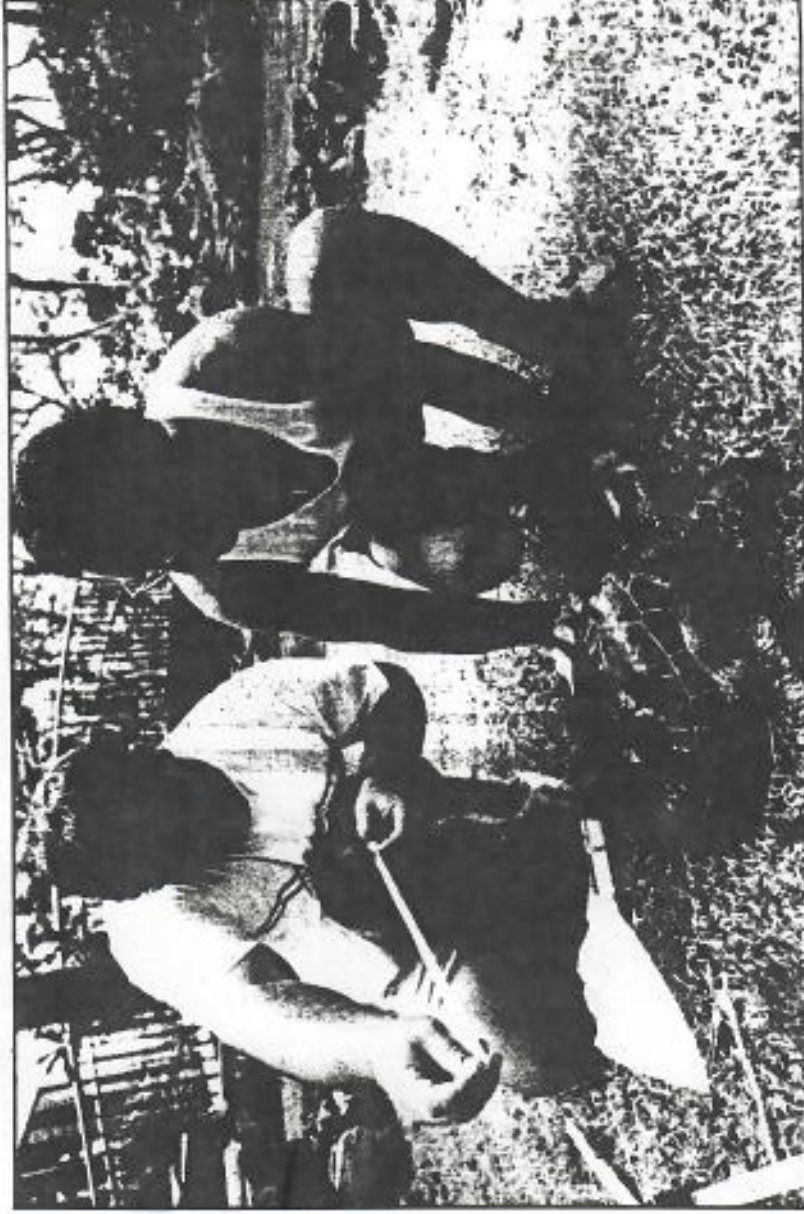
lagoon at its Makapuu facility. The turtles, called hono by the Hawaiians, are grandfathered in as exempt from the U.S. Endangered Species Act, which prohibits keeping a threatened species in captivity.

"We are not taking them out of

the wild, they are being produced in captivity and then sent out," Kaiser said. "They are cute and cuddly and have the sweetest little faces. By sending them to aquarists and to the Mauna Lani, we hope to educate people about the protection of their species."

Each summer, hatchlings born at Sea Life Park are released into the wild within 24 hours of hatching, but the attrition rate is very high because the tiny turtles are easy prey for birds and fish as they make their way toward deep water. The

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TURTLE TAG: Steve Kaiser of Sea Life Park (left) and Daniel Akaka Jr. of the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel measure and tag a young green sea turtle before releasing it into the ocean.

Education key to turtles' survival

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turtles spend their first year of life floating along with the ocean currents, Kaiser said.

Sea Life Park's experimental program gives some of the hatchlings a better chance at survival. A portion of each season's hatchlings are sent to the Vancouver Aquarium when 2 to 3 months old to be raised for about a year. The turtles are flown back to the park and then on to the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows to be raised and released.

"The turtles we released are about 2 years old and at the age where they would return to the near-shore water as part of their natural cycle," Kaiser said. "We are not trying to confuse them.

"We don't claim to head start the turtles. The program has not really been shown to increase the numbers of turtles in the wild. It may be too early to have had an impact, or we may just not be putting enough out. What we are trying to do with our turtles is an education thing. We want our turtles to get out to as many different oceanariums and aquariums and zoos as possible."

Green sea turtles are primarily vegetarians and can weigh up to 400 pounds. They eat algae or limu that grows underwater on coral reefs and on rocks close to shore. Green turtles prefer to live near "pastures" of limu that are in near-shore waters around the Hawaiian Islands. The area fronting the Mauna Lani is one of the grazing areas for the hono.

Kaiser said the National Marine Fisheries Service gets 20 to 60 reported cases of turtle poaching a year in Hawaii.

"That's too many," Kaiser

said. "Enforcement won't solve the problem; education is the answer."

Kaiser said he recently sent five more turtles to the Mauna Lani and the hotel now has 13 turtles living in its lagoons.

"It is a lot of work for them to feed and check on the turtles," he said. "But they do a really good job. They have an extensive array of ponds with fish and algae in the ponds. They really care about and for the turtles.

"It is not just hotel guests that watch the release, a lot of local

people come down. Hopefully it will make a big imprint on those younger kids and when they grow up they will say 'I'm not going to poach a turtle or kill a turtle.'"