

The Honolulu Advertiser

Hawaii Report

4 giant turtles



© ★★ Wednesday, November 10, 1976 A-3

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What do you do with ~~the~~ 400-pound green sea turtles?

Some people might eat them. But not the folks out at Sea Life Park. Having brought the threat of such a situation on themselves, they recently have been taking the only honorable course: letting the creatures go.

Actually, only a few of the total turtle population at the park fit the 400-pound category. For this reason — and because they are mature, able to fend for themselves, and reproduce their diminishing numbers — staffers at the park yesterday let four of them loose in the sea.

Park officials have no fear of running out of their turtle supply, however. For one thing, as public relations manager Jane Martin explains, "the turtle population here keeps expanding as people pick them up and bring them in."

But more than this, the park's inordinate number of the creatures — at least until recently — was due to a unique situation: the first success of a three-year-old effort to breed green sea turtles in captivity.

Working together with University of Hawaii marine biologist George Balasz, "the park built a turtle lagoon with a nice warm sandy beach where they're supposed to crawl out and lay their eggs," said Martin.

Unfortunately, though, the mama turtles didn't (or wouldn't) get the hang of it for several years.

"Sometimes they'd lay their eggs — we'd find 110 of them floating around in the water. So all the trainers would dive in, net the she said, and then bury them in the sand," noting, at the same time, that the eggs "look exactly like Ping-pong balls."

Efforts to incubate the eggs this way never worked, however, so an artificial incubator was custom made. And this time, the park hit the jackpot.

Not only did the incubator bring forth about 100 baby green sea turtles, but also, at the same time roughly 40 more hatched in the sand. In all, the 140 or so were "the first green sea turtle eggs ever hatched at Sea Life Park," Martin said.

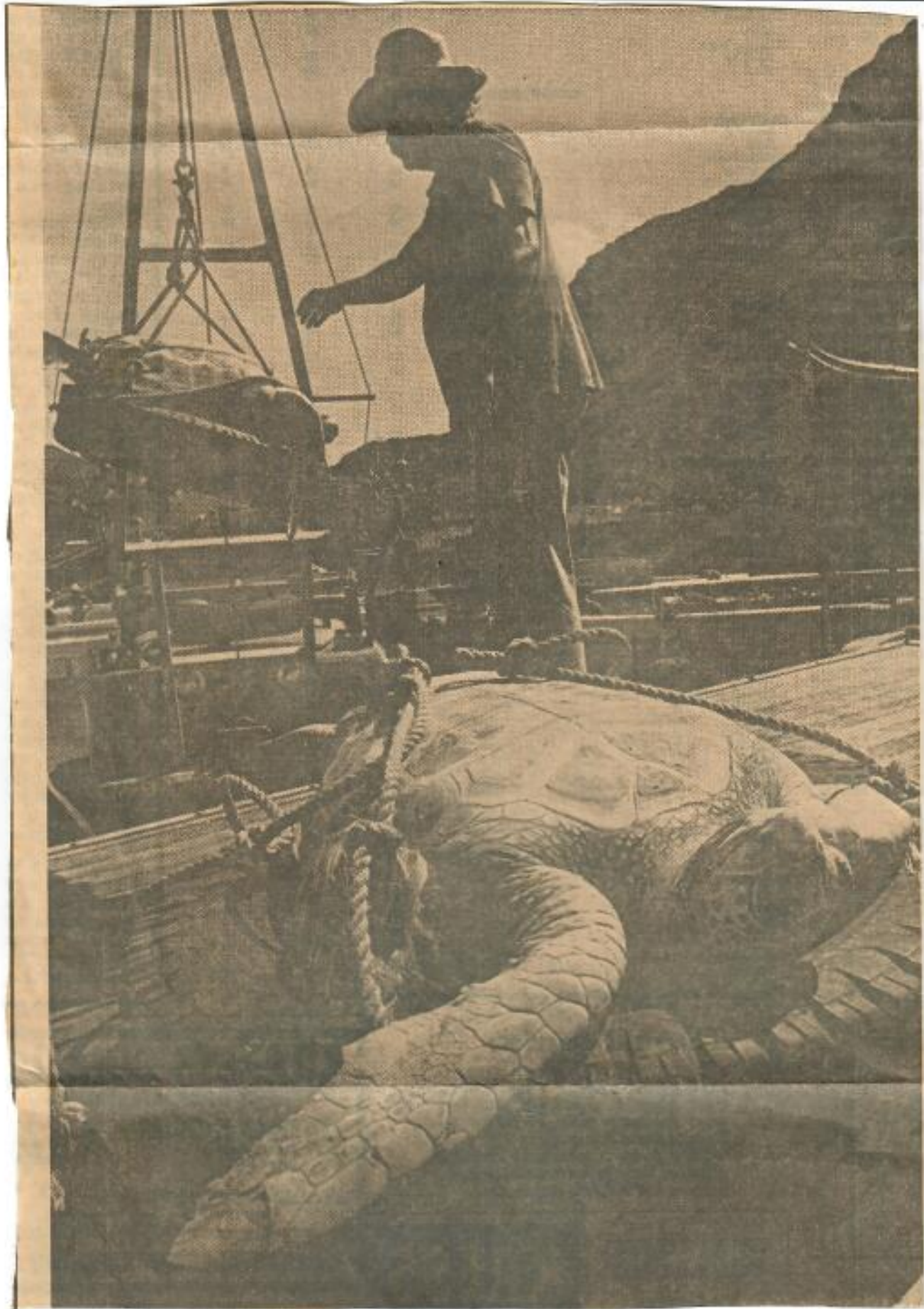
And, she added, "they're adorable."

Although not an endangered species, green sea turtles are protected by State laws, which restrict the conditions under which they can be captured.

Hoping to increase the local green sea turtle population, the park has saved a few and released most of the other babies at night so predators, such as birds and big fish would have a harder time catching them.

Martin observed that in leaving, the tiny creatures have also abandoned a steady, dependable diet of "chopped squid, brine shrimp, chopped fish and frozen plankton — but no wine."

But a quick introduction to the open sea was necessary, she said. Otherwise, their instincts "to find food and protect themselves would soon be destroyed by living in captivity."





Like a tourist stretched out on Waikiki beach, this giant green sea turtle placidly soaks up the sun. Together with his friend on the tire in the background, he is about to be released to the sea (above).

With a mighty heave-ho, staffers from Sea Life park send this green sea turtle into the water, for his first taste of freedom in about 10 years (right).

Aquarium Releases 7 Turtles

By Helen Altorn
Star-Bulletin Writer

The Waikiki Aquarium released seven adult green sea turtles off Barbers Point yesterday to help build up the declining turtle population in Hawaiian waters.

Aquarium Director Leighton Taylor said the turtles were tagged to keep track of their movements.

He said the aquarium kept the best turtles in its collection to display in a new sea turtle exhibit to be built with funds appropriated by the last Legislature.

HOWEVER, HE SAID, "We have a few too many sea turtles for our current exhibit space."

The excess turtles were loaded onto the Easy Rider, skippered by Skip Naftel, for the trip to Barbers Point. Naftel, a fisherman interested in conservation, donated his boat and his crew for the project.

Green sea turtles have been released before by the aquarium in cooperation with George H. Balazs, University of Hawaii marine biologist who specializes in turtle research.

The only remaining green turtle nesting site in the Hawaiian Archipelago is French Shoals, 480 miles northwest of Honolulu.

TAYLOR SAID 10 GREEN sea turtles were released from the beach in front of the aquarium in January 1973 and in March that year 11 were released off the north coast of Niihau.

Three turtles from the first group were recovered in 1975 at Maui, Oahu and Molokai.

"The most comforting thing was that one of the second group released off Niihau was recovered in June 1974 at French Frigate Shoals and was nesting," Taylor said.

"The reason that's comforting is that it indicates these turtles held in captivity for some time are able to return to nature and become part of the natural population."

TAYLOR SAID A TURTLE released from Sea Life Park in 1973 also was recovered in January this year from French Frigate Shoals.

He said the new turtle display at the aquarium will have a little sandy beach built into it so the turtles will be able to nest — "we hope."

"So in addition to being a display, it will have a research element to it," he added. He said he and Balazs will be working closely on the exhibit "to observe turtles in a seminatural habitat."

State regulations went into effect in 1974 to prohibit the taking of leatherback, hawksbill and green sea turtles in Hawaiian waters.

Green sea turtles may be taken for home consumption but only with a permit and over a certain size.