

Norton Chan, a biologist at the Waikiki Aquarium, shows a green sea turtle on loan from Sea Life Park. Some Native Hawaiians want to resume cultural uses of the turtles.

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# Hawaiians want turtles back on cultural menus

**By Bunky Bakutis**  
Advertiser Leeward Oahu Bureau

**WAIANA**E — For 20 years, native islanders reluctantly lived with federal protection for the green sea turtle. But now, as numbers of the honu improve throughout the Pacific, islanders want to resume harvesting the turtle, restoring

its multi-faceted role in local culture.

"Over the past five years, I've seen turtles everywhere around Oahu," said Native Hawaiian fisherman William Aila. "It's time to take a look for establishing a protocol for bringing turtles back into our culture."

"I can remember my uncles catching turtles

and my aunts preparing them. But that has been lost over several generations."

Currently there is no comprehensive count of turtle populations. But tagging programs and nesting studies indicate dramatic rises in green sea turtle populations of

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all ages since they were placed on the federal threatened species list in 1978.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 bans killing certain wildlife listed either as "endangered" (those on the verge of extinction) or "threatened."

According to state aquatic biologist Bill Puleloa of Molokai, "the green sea turtle is not in imminent danger of extinction." A Molokai tagging program that began in 1981 has placed plastic identification tags on the flippers of 2,000 turtles of all sizes "with no end in sight," Puleloa said.

Tagging not only allows marine biologists to establish rough estimates of stock, but also tracks migratory patterns and growth rates of turtles.

A 25-year survey of nesting female turtles at French Frigate Shoals (about 20 acres of sand beaches northwest of Hawaii's main islands) has shown an increase from 50 to 500. Northern shoal turtles migrate to the main Hawaiian islands and are said to make up the majority of Hawaii's breeding stock. However, there are no total nesting counts at main Hawaiian islands.

George Balazs, who heads the Marine Turtle Research Program for the National Marine Fishery Service at its Honolulu laboratory, said the increase in nesting females is "extremely promising. This is the first time we've seen numbers like this since 1969. There are very few places in the world where stocks have regenerated like this."

Although increases may be highest among juvenile turtles, Balazs said adult numbers also have gone up, which "is a clear indication that survival is good." Green sea turtles are estimated to begin reproducing when they reach between 25 and 30 years of age.

### Off menus in 1974

In 1974, state officials took the first action to curb over-harvesting by banning commercial sales. However, family consumption was permitted. The action effectively took turtle off menus at restaurants such as the former Tiki Top in Kaneohe or Old Sally's in Pokai Bay.

In 1978, federal officials put green sea turtles on the "threatened" list following the documented depletion of stock from Florida to Polynesia. The ban removed the prized, lean meat from Hawaii family dinner tables or luau.

One of the main causes cited for protection was that beach-front development had adversely affected turtle nest-

# Turtles: Tradition limited fishermen to harvest for family



## Hawaiian green sea turtle

*Chelonia mydas*  
Hawaiian name: Honu

A migratory reptile that becomes sexually mature at an average of 25 years old. Although individual breeding does not occur every year, a female may produce 100 eggs up to six times per season. A record weight was recorded in Kaurakakai at 410 pounds. Mature turtles are herbivores feeding on algae and sea grasses.

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ing sites.

Green turtles have had a prominent position in Hawaiian culture since islanders first migrated here. Turtle was not only a rich source of protein, but also was used for medicine, functional tools and adornment.

According to Bishop Museum officials, use of decorative turtle shell was reserved only for *ali'i*. Polished shell was used to ring the staff of *kahili* (markers of *ali'i* presence), and Kamehameha I drank medicine from a round, two-quart turtle shell container, said Dr. Roger Rose, head of the museum collection department.

Bracelets — and more functional items such as fish hooks — were made from turtle shell. Tough upper carapace was used as a scraping tool in making cordage from plant fiber, Rose said.

From the late 1800s up until the 1970s, decorative hair combs, pendants, earrings, fishing lures and even buttons

were commonly used by all Hawaiians.

Hawaiians consider turtles a demigod, because it linked the land and sea. Honu is one of numerous animals that Hawaiians traditionally honor as *'aumakua* (a family guardian). That status does not bar others from hunting the turtle. But tradition holds hunters to taking only what an individual may need to feed his *ohang*, and in that way protect the resource.

Turtle meat was prepared in numerous ways: steaks were cut from flipper connecting muscle and either grilled or dried; also meat was chopped for stews or soups. The green fat, for which the turtle got its name, was boiled and the remaining oil used as a healing salve for burns or wounds.

## Marianas seek new policy

Recently, the U.S. commonwealth of the Northern Marianas has taken the lead in efforts to restore a limited cultural take of turtles.

Under the auspices of an educational exemption, one of five such categories in the Endangered Species Act, a report was completed in December detailing cultural use of turtles by two indigenous groups, the Chamorros and Saipan Carolinians.

The National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has scheduled a workshop early this fall on their exemption request. Many Hawaiians are watching developments closely.

Limited turtle take also has become an increasingly hot topic among other Pacific islanders under U.S. jurisdiction, said Don Schug, a staff member for the Native and Indigenous Rights committee of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

"The council will want to do studies in Hawaii and American Samoa to look at the cul-

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# Turtles: Recovery of species sparks

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tural importance of turtles and possible legal exemptions to the law," Schug said.

Rights committee chief Isaac Harp of Maui said the 17-member panel will keep up pressure for a possible exemption, especially in the light of limited take allowed for long-line fishing vessels.

"I've talked to a lot of kupuna (Hawaiian elders) who want turtle returned as a food source before they pass away," Harp said. "And why are long-line fishermen allowed to kill so many, and we can't take any?"

One of the five exemptions to the ban is "incidental" turtles caught by long-line fleets. Boats operating northwest of the main Hawaiian Islands are allowed an annual take of 18 green turtles out of 129 total caught, according to Schug. When turtles are pulled up dead on hooks, fishermen must throw them back.

The Navy also receives a limited exemption at a bomb-target island in the Northern Marianas.

## Children 'brainwashed'

Waianae fisherman and Native rights committee member William Aila said traditional Hawaiian culture is losing an understanding of what the turtle represents.

"There are generations who have lost the knowledge of how to catch, clean and prepare turtle," Aila said. "And I resent the singular 'warm and fuzzy' representation of turtles being made in some educational efforts. Our children are being brainwashed. Turtle primarily was a respected and required part of our menu."

Turtle numbers now demand analysis of how to control the population, Aila said. But Gene Nitta of the National Marine Fisheries Service disagrees.

"By no means have turtle populations recovered enough to be taken off the threatened species list," he said. A limited-take program would only heighten enforcement and



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## debate over protection

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Maui motorists are warned they may encounter green sea turtles on this coastal highway. The once-threatened species has recovered significantly since being protected by federal law in 1978.

poaching problems, which, in turn, would slow turtle recovery, Nitta said.

Declining to speculate on what size population might allow a limited take, Nitta referred to the federal recovery plan. Among a number of requirements, the plan states that area turtle stocks must average 5,000 females estimated to nest annually over six years before it qualifies to come off the protected list.

Another problem cited by federal officials is a virus, fibropapilloma, which causes life-threatening tumors to grow on turtles. The disease was

reported to affect 42 percent of turtles captured, examined and released in Kaneohe Bay between 1991 and 1995.

Molokai's Puleloa said that he first discovered a turtle with the disease in 1986. Many juvenile turtles have been found since then with tumors.

"We're looking for it now. Some (turtles with tumors) get worse and some get better. We can't make heads or tails of it," he said. "It's not contagious. We think it's something latent in the turtles that is allowed to surface as tumors because of changes in the environment," Puleloa said.

Balazs said the disease counteracts some of the recent good news.

"Possibly, it could cause a large decline," he said. "It is necessary to manage turtles in a conservative manner, as everything (such as turtle reproductive age) is so protracted."

But there's another reason why turtles have flourished again here, Balazs said.

"There's over 1,000 miles of coastline here with huge fields of benthic algae (which turtles consume). I see the carrying capacity of these fields for turtles as many times greater."

# Buffalo Keaulana tells of turtle hunt

**MAKAHA** — Trade winds first brought a strong "limu (seaweed) smell" of turtle from outside Kaena Point.

Buffalo Keaulana, then 35, looked north from his Boston Whaler, following his sense of smell. The algae-covered back of a 300-pound turtle bobbed on the ocean surface some 100 yards away. These days in the mid-1960s was when turtle could be sought openly, and Keaulana was one of several Leeward fishermen who caught them to share with other residents.

As he approached, the turtle dived and Keaulana quickly donned his diving mask to check under what reef crack the turtle would hide. Mentally marking its position, he put on fins and a scuba tank before heading down some 80 feet.

When the turtle was cornered in a dark reef cave, Keaulana blocked the entrance. As it attempted to elude him, he grabbed both sides of its shell when it tried to escape, holding tight to each edge. Spinning wildly, the turtle took off so fast, Keaulana had to press his face mask against its back lest water pressure tear it off.

"I had to hold on until he got tired," said Keaulana. "Then, I placed my knee near the back of his shell, pushed down and steered him to the surface. Once we got to the surface, I held the turtle down under so it couldn't catch its breath. No breath and the turtle gets weaker."

His fishing partner, the late Homer Barrett, brought the boat around while Keaulana held the turtle upside-down on the ocean's surface. "Once you let the turtle turn right side up, you're in for another ride," he said.

The two men hoisted the turtle onto the boat and returned to Makaha Beach, where Keaulana lived with his family.

On the beach, he killed and cleaned the turtle.

"One upper flipper shoulder weighed about 75 pounds. That's a lot of turtle steaks. This is how I'd feed my family and friends. The meat is delicious, a delicacy," Keaulana said. "And my freezer was always full."

Keaulana is now 64 years old, and hopes to some day teach his grandchildren how to harvest turtle.

— Bunky Bakutis

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HAWAII TRIBUNE HERALD 6-8-98  
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# Hawaii report

## Is it time to hunt turtles again?

HONOLULU — Endangered species status has helped boost the population of the green sea turtle, maybe too much for the turtles' own good.

With the number of turtles rising in island waters, people of various Pacific Island cultures say it's again time to start hunting the animals.

Green sea turtles have been under federal protection for 20 years. While there are no comprehensive counts to put an exact number on the turtle population, nesting studies done by biologists at French Frigate Shoals show a dramatic increase in the population.

Most promising is the rise in the number of nesting female turtles, said George Balazs of the National Marine Fisheries Service's marine turtle research program.

"This is the first time we've seen numbers like this since 1969," Balazs said. "There are very few places in the world where stocks regenerated like this."

Hunting turtles and eating them at one time was a big part of Pacific Island culture, and those who remember when that was the case say procedures need to be put in place to allow for some hunting of the turtles.

"I can remember my uncle catching turtles and my aunts preparing them," fisherman William Alla said. "But that has been lost over several generations."