

CAPTIVE REARED GREEN SEA TURTLES RELEASED INTO THE WILD

Over the past few weeks the Honolulu Laboratory of the National Marine Fisheries Service has released a total of 165 8-lb yearling green sea turtles (Chelonia mydas) at coastal sites on Oahu, the neighbor islands, and at French Frigate Shoals. The releases were carried out in cooperation with the State Department of Land and Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The liberated turtles were originally obtained as one-ounce day old hatchlings at French Frigate Shoals, a remote site in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands located 500 miles from Honolulu where green sea turtles go to breed. French Frigate Shoals is a unit of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Following transport to Oahu by chartered aircraft in September of 1980, the hatchlings were reared under contract to Sea Life Park for a one-year period. The objective of this project was to evaluate an experimental marking procedure involving small pieces of white tissue surgically grafted into the hatchlings' black shell. The study's overall results are still being analyzed, but the technique appears to be promising for certain types of marking needs in the research of sea turtle populations.

The green sea turtle has experienced declines in both numbers and range as the result of man's overexploitation and encroachment on habitat. The species is now fully protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and wildlife regulations of the State of Hawaii. It is hoped that the 165 turtles that have been released will eventually become part of the breeding colony as mature adults. The ability of captive reared sea turtles to successfully adapt to the wild and grow to adulthood is not known for certain. However, in several other areas of the world where similar rearing or "headstart" projects have been undertaken, some encouraging results have been achieved. Nevertheless, many years will very likely be needed in order to positively demonstrate the value of this restocking conservation practice. Green sea turtles do not mature until they reach an average shell length of about 36 inches and a weight of 200 lbs. The turtles grow very slowly in the wild where they feed primarily on algae (limu) and sea grasses. On-going tagging studies here in Hawaii indicate that naturally occurring turtles can take anywhere from 10 to 60 years to grow to adulthood.

All of the young turtles that have been released are individually identified with a small numbered metal tag attached to a front flipper. Information from the public on the sightings of these tagged turtles will be appreciated.

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