

turtles get a sea-going party

By JEANNE WELLENKAMP

Christian Science Monitor News Service

MIAMI, Fla. — On the beach at Cape Florida, Kathy Hilderbrand planned a quiet going-to-sea party for 250 turtles she'd raised since they were three weeks old.

Instead of quiet, Kathy found television and newspaper photographers focused on her. Someone hung a microphone around her neck and asked her to talk turtle. A crowd of friendly, curious swimmers gathered to watch this first launching of turtles from the Florida state park at the tip of Key Biscayne.

FOR KATHY, the day was the climax of a year's hard work raising turtles at Miami's Seaquarium. She felt the hours well-spent because green turtles have almost disappeared from Florida waters and are an endangered species throughout the Caribbean.

"Mostly it's man's fault," she said. "They've taken the eggs and the turtles themselves to eat. Also, if turtle eggs hatch on the beach, they have a very low survival rate because of predators.

"That's why the Florida Department of Natural Resources runs a turtle hatchery in Jensen Beach."

ROSS WITHAM is in



Christian Science Monitor Service Photo

Kathy Hilderbrand frees her turtles.

charge, and he offered the Seaquarium about 400 baby turtles. Kathy got the project of raising them until they were big enough to be safe in the ocean.

Kathy, now a senior at Hialeah High School, has been enrolled in a special science program for gifted

students since she was in seventh grade. But she admits she knew little about turtles when she took on the project of raising the 400 babies.

"I never really thought about turtles, except maybe the dime-store kind I had when I was little.

But I'm as interested as anybody in ecology. Helping these turtles was one way of preserving the balance of nature. That appealed to me."

THE TURTLES were 1½-inches across when Kathy started to work with them. Twice a week she drove to the Seaquarium. There, her duties included weighing, measuring, and tagging the turtles and devising diets for them.

"I divided the turtles into three groups and took samples from each group. Some were fed only fish, others only lettuce and mangrove leaves, and the third group got fish and the leaves.

"I picked the mangrove leaves. That was really a mess—mangroves have a black, sticky sap. We found out a mixed diet promoted the best growth."

Kathy gave the diet lists to Seaquarium staff members who fed the turtles twice a day.

BUT CLEANING the tanks was exclusively her job.

"I always wore shorts or jeans, because I'd get kind of wet. One day I was sitting on top of the tank to clean it and I fell in a little. Well, it was only three feet deep, and it wasn't that hard to get out. The turtles were kind of surprised. They gathered around and looked at me, but they didn't take a nip out of me."

Kathy says the turtles became friendly. "I don't think they really knew me, but if I would come up and

tand at the side of the tank, all the turtles would swim over toward me."

WHEN the turtles grew to the size of 10-inch dinner plates, 250 were selected to be released.

"I was really surprised at all the people who were here to watch the turtles head for the water. My mother was there, and she couldn't believe these were the baby turtles I'd started out with, they'd grown so much.

"Naturalists believe the turtles will return to the same beach to lay their eggs. That will be in about six years, and I want to be there when it happens."

GREEN TURTLES may eventually become plentiful again, thanks to conservationists such as Kathy Hilderbrand.

She hopes that man will remember what almost happened to the green turtles and stop taking them for steaks and soup, even though they are considered a delicacy.

As for Kathy, she has never tasted turtle steak and never will.

"I couldn't eat a cute turtle," she said. "I hope people will let them live in peace."