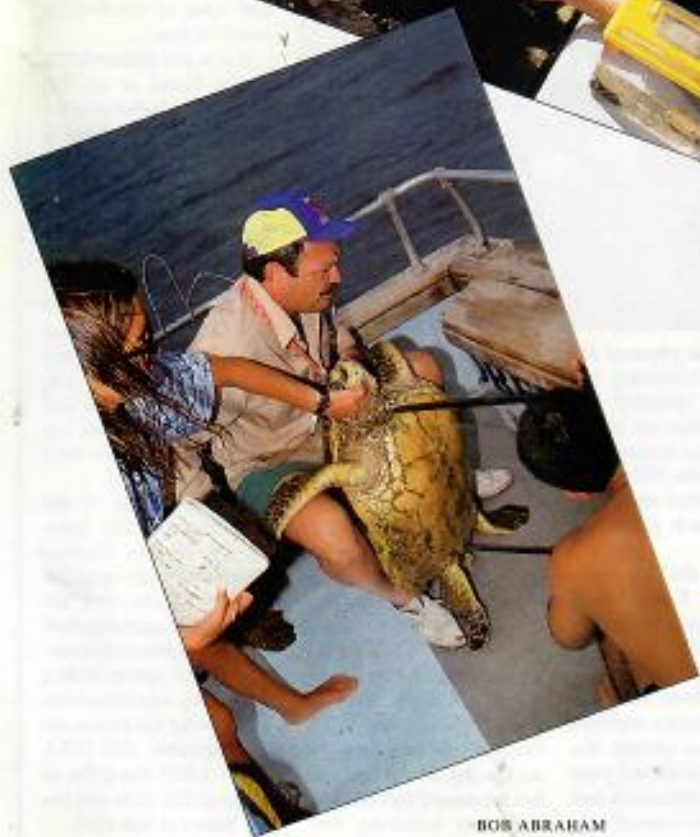


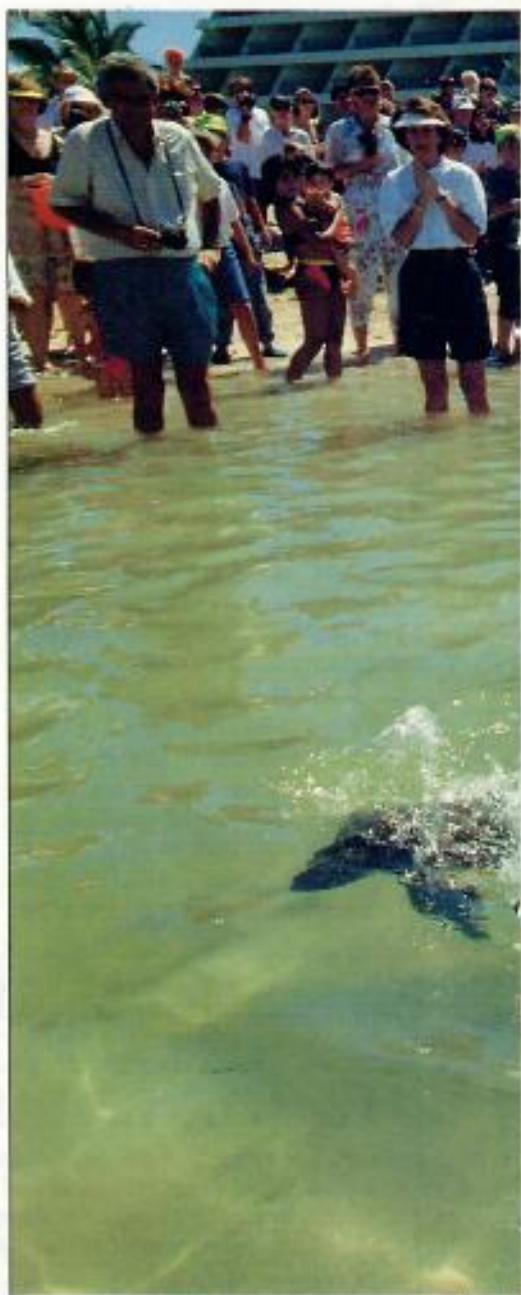
HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

BY NOREEN PARKS

Researchers are finding new ways to protect Hawaii's denizens of the deep. Now you can help



BOB ABRAHAM



Every Fourth of July, as fireworks light Hawaii's skies, a different kind of celebration happens at the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel & Bungalows on the Big Island. A dozen or so young *honu* (green sea turtles) reared in nearby ponds are ushered to the edge of the sea and released during an event called Turtle Independence Day. It's done in the spirit of *malama kai*—caring for the sea and the life it holds.

The islands of Hawaii are surrounded by waters rich in marine life. Nearly two dozen kinds of whales and dolphins, about 700 types of fishes, four varieties of turtles and the shy monk seal swim in Hawaiian waters, while a vivid cast of thousands of species—from



Christmas tree worms to cauliflower corals—populates the seafloor. Opportunities to enjoy this marine wealth abound, delighting residents and visitors alike.

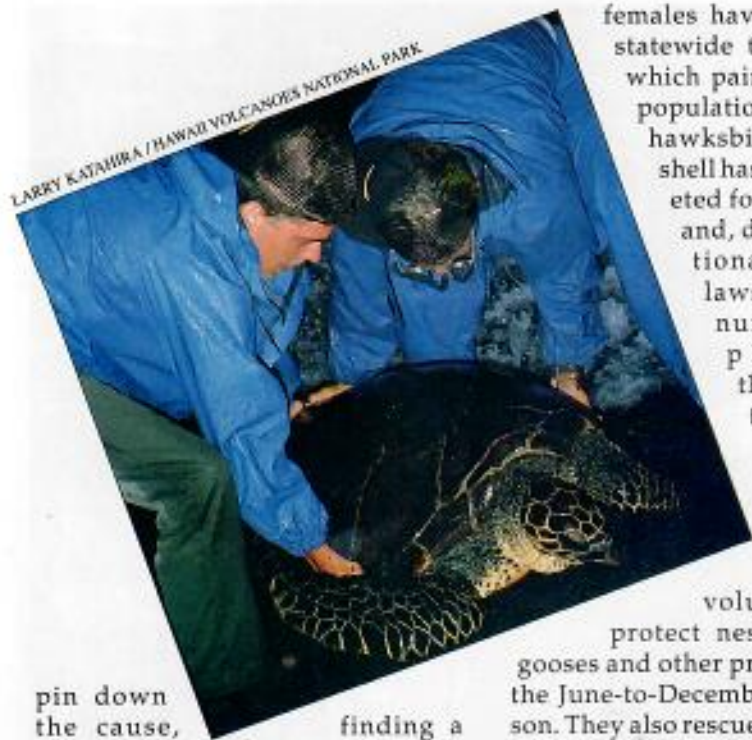
But even in the waters of paradise, the challenges of survival can be daunting. Fortunately, there's no shortage of folks concerned about the well-being of Hawaii's ocean environment. From Hanauma Bay to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, researchers are learning more and more about the underwater world. What's more, many of their projects are accessible to the public, for observation or even for participation on a hands-on basis. Following is a sampling of marine conservation programs across the state.

As Hawaii's oldest marine resident from an evolutionary perspective, the *honu* (green sea turtle) receives special protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. For more than two decades, George Balasz of the National Marine Fisheries Service and his staff have studied and tracked the green turtles. Often assisted by trained volunteers, Balasz's team captures *honu* at some 20 sites around the main Hawaiian Islands and at their nesting beaches on French Frigate Shoals in the Northwest Islands. They measure the turtles, check their overall health, and attach flipper tags marked with the capture location to aid in tracking their movements in island waters.

Hands-on marine life programs include Turtle Independence Day at the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel & Bungalows (above) and outdoor classroom experiences at Sea Life Park (opposite, top). Off Waikiki, researcher George Balasz monitors a *honu* aboard Atlantis' Reef Divers' charter boat.

Balasz's group often rides aboard the Atlantis Reef Divers' charter boat to monitor turtles off Waikiki, giving passengers a chance to watch the scientific team in action.

The outlook on the *honu*'s future is a mixture of good news and bad, Balasz says: "The number of females nesting at French Frigate Shoals has gradually increased to about 1,300. But many of the immature animals are afflicted with a debilitating tumor disease." If researchers don't



LARRY KATAHIRA / HAWAII VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

females have been tagged statewide to date—all of which paints a very dim population picture. The hawksbill's handsome shell has long been coveted for jewelry items and, despite international protection laws, the turtle's numbers have plummeted throughout the tropical Pacific.

In an effort to boost the Hawaiian hawksbill population, volunteer groups protect nests from mongooses and other predators during the June-to-December nesting season. They also rescue newly hatched turtles from a variety of hazards. "Hatchlings are attracted to light, so the most difficult thing is to protect nests where roads run along the beaches," Katahira says. Last year a record number of good Samaritans rescued more than 1,600 Big Island hatchlings and nudged them safely out to sea. Katahira hopes to get volunteers to help the hawksbill turtles at Kihei next. (Members of the public interested

in participating in hawksbill monitoring on the Big Island can reach Katahira at 967-8226.)

Rescue is also a key ingredient in the strategy to aid the endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Less than 1,500 monk seals remain today, their numbers scattered around a half dozen atolls of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. Their steady decline—due partly to a high sensitivity to human disturbance, especially by females rearing pups—has increased recently as food supplies diminish in some areas. Young pups, unskilled at catching meals, are most vulnerable to starvation, so each year the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the monk seal research center at Sea Life Park have taken in a small number of orphaned or weakened pups. The chocolate brown, liquid-eyed pups are fattened up until they're strong and savvy enough to be returned to their natal waters.

Hawaii residents and visitors may soon see monk seals in Neighbor Island waters. An imbalance in the number of male seals has led to mobbing of females during the breeding season.

pin down the cause, finding a way to help, the population could crash.

Since 1976, turtle specialists at Sea Life Park on Oahu have tagged and released about 2,000 juvenile honu into island waters, hatched from eggs laid at the man-made beach on the Park's turtle lagoon. Besides sending hatchlings to the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel & Bungalows for rearing and eventual release, Sea Life Park also loans out turtle "ambassadors" for limited periods to aquaria on the mainland. Last year Balasz tested out a special transmitter on Park turtles, for use in a satellite tracking program that could unravel the mysteries of their migrations around the Islands.

Researchers have only begun to learn about the habits of another Hawaiian turtle, the endangered hawksbill. Larry Katahira of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park has worked with volunteers since 1989 to locate hawksbill nesting sites on a half-dozen southern Big Island beaches. The hawksbill has also been sighted at Kihei, Maui, and Halawa Valley on Molokai, but only 18 mature



BILL PERRY

B. BECKNER

Making like a monk seal, a researcher gets up-close and personal in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. Inset: A seal pup at the NMFS facility in Honolulu. Top: Ron Kozar and Walt Stobie handle a hawksbill at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

Often, seriously injured females fall prey to sharks. To protect the shrinking number of females, the NMFS monk seal recovery team is considering relocating some of the more aggressive males from their breeding waters in the northwest to the southeast end of the island chain.

One of Hawaii's most majestic visitors—and a singing one at that—is the featured star of the recently designated Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale Sanctuary. Unique among the 13 national marine sanctuaries for its focus on a single species, the humpback sanctuary will coordinate protection, education and research on the whales in their winter breeding and calving waters around Hawaii. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Sanctuar-

ies and Reserves Division and the State of Hawaii have joined together to draw up a management plan with the help of citizens and local government. "We've had lots of public input to expand the boundaries to encompass all the major islands out to a depth of 100 fathoms," says Janice Sessing, NOAA project specialist. "People sometimes think that a sanctuary means restrictions and exclusion from an area. But really this is a tremendous opportunity to acknowledge the international significance of Hawaiian waters to the humpback, and to improve our understanding of the whales' habits." NOAA is planning a visitor center on Maui and interpretive signs in coastal locations bordering the sanctuary. The agency will be inviting public comment on the draft environmental

impact statement later this summer.

The mighty tiger shark—revered in Hawaiian culture, feared in recreational waters—may well be Hawaii's least understood denizen of the deep. A project led by Kim Holland of the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology aims to learn more about tiger shark movements in island waters. If tiger sharks have a home range—that is, stay predominantly in one area—then fishing them could be effective in curbing shark attacks. But if they wander from area to area, such control programs make little sense. Furthermore, as top predators, tigers keep smaller, gamefish-eating sharks in check. So removing tiger sharks allows more medium-sized sharks to survive and indirectly reduces the populations of gamefish.

So far, Holland's team has caught

Get Your Feet Wet! Ocean Education Around the Islands

Atlantis Submarines' Na Hoa O Ke Kai ("Friends of the Sea") Keiki Day: July 16 from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. at Kakaako Waterfront Park, Honolulu. Free admission. Exhibits, arts and crafts, games and entertainment, all focused on protecting Hawaii's ocean environment.

Atlantis Living Classroom: For kids of all ages (must be 3 feet tall). Begins with a school classroom presentation by an Atlantis educator, followed by a visit to the depths in an Atlantis submarine. Reduced trip rates, scholarships available. The international company recently welcomed its three millionth Living Classroom student on a cruise off Waikiki Beach. The program is offered at Waikiki (973-9811), Kona (329-6626) and Maui (667-2224).

Sea Life Park Marine Research and Education Foundation sponsors a variety of education and research activities. Call 259-7933. Conservation Today is a public fair held at the park each June, with conservation-related booths, exhibits and activities sponsored by business, civic and environmental groups. Free admission for each child



On Oahu, walking tour participants learn about the fragile ecosystem inside Hanuma Bay.

who brings in a bag of aluminum cans. SeaReach is a program of educational presentations geared to audiences from primary school to adult, including topics such as marine debris, sharks and fish biology. Presenters will travel to the Neighbor Islands.

Moanalua Gardens Foundation's Sea Search: Exploring Tropical Marine Life Program: A multifaceted, interactive educational program that will be distributed soon

to every school and public library in Hawaii. It includes a CD-ROM multi-media resource for use by grade five to adults, utilizing slides, video, sound and text to illustrate many topics; a computerized database of tropical Pacific marine organisms; and interactive student exercises that focus on solving marine conservation problems.

Malama Kai Foundation's "Hawaii Island: On Loan From Our Children." Made with financial support from the Pikake Fund, this video production focuses on the sustainable use of the Big Island's coastal resources. Soon available at schools and libraries around the Big Island.

Hanauma Bay Educational Program: One of Hawaii's most popular snorkeling beaches is on the road to recovery after an excess of visitors during the last 20 years. Sea Grant and Friends of Hanauma Bay sponsor displays and daily morning walking tours to inform visitors about the fragility of the nature park and its reef animals. A new visitor center overlooking the Bay is in the works, to open possibly by next summer. Call Sea Grant at 956-2870.

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advertiser

and tagged only a handful of sharks with radio transmitters and tracked them for a few days, but the results were surprising. "Because of their carnivorous diet, tigers were assumed to stick close to coasts and cruise surface waters," he reports, "but we tracked these sharks swimming far offshore and diving more than 1,000 feet deep." The straight paths swum by the tagged tigers suggested that they "knew where they were headed," he says, so rather than being aimless wanderers, they might indeed have a home turf. But getting an accurate picture of the Hawaiian tiger shark's swimming behavior will require tracking more animals for longer periods—a task that's about to begin.

Much of Hawaii's marine bounty is concentrated on and around its dynamic reefs, where boat anchors can damage fragile corals. Increasing concern over this problem prompted the University of Hawaii Sea Grant Extension Service and the Malama Kai Foundation to round up the funds for day-use boat moorings on the Big Island's Kona Coast. Divers from the Ocean Recreation Council of Hawaii (TORCH) recently installed 46 moorings, which are available for public use on a first-come, first-served basis. A map of mooring locations is available from the West Hawaii Sea Grant office (322-2044). Three hundred additional moorings will soon be installed around the Islands.

Sea Grant has also launched a water quality monitoring program in which teams of volunteers test streams and near-shore water monthly for nutrients, pollutants, acidity and microbial contamination. A pilot project already underway with community groups at Kailua and Waimanalo Bays on Oahu will soon branch out to West Hawaii. (For more on volunteer monitoring on Oahu call 956-8475; in Kona, call 322-2044.)

With a growing concern for and understanding of Hawaii's marine environment—and with the new cooperation among citizens, business and government—the spirit of *malama kai* is thriving. To get involved or to learn more, check out the projects and events listed in the box at left. □



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ON THE COVER

Bible in hand, Rev. John Richardson reflects the traditional spirit of the Island of Lanai.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ALLAN SEIDEN