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Hilo - Tribune Herald

Hunting of green sea turtles

In June the Honolulu Advertiser ran an article suggesting that the hunting of green sea turtles (honu) should be allowed on a limited basis for cultural purposes. The rationale used to justify hunting the honu was the increased birth rate observed at French Frigate Shoals. Marine biologist and divers quickly jumped to the defense of the honu and the Advertiser printed an editorial two days later stating that given the current evidence it is too early to be rushing the honu back to the dinner table. The Hawaii Tribune-Herald picked up the original story, but I have not seen anything on the follow-up editorial.

While honu may be hatching in greater numbers on remote islands, when they reach the main Hawaiian Islands many are contracting a virus which causes the growth of debilitating fibropapilloma tumors. The tumors generally grow around the mouth and eyes blinding the turtles and making it impossible for them to feed, resulting in eventual death. Hilo has a high rate of honu with tumors (30 percent). In fact it is almost impossible to make a dive off the Keaukaha coast without encountering honu with the tumors. The 19th Legislature recognized the threat of fibropapilloma tumors to Hawaii's honu by passing Hawaii Senate Resolution 29 in support of the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Sea Turtle Recovery Plan. Marine biologists at the University of Hawaii have isolated the virus, which causes the tumors, and are working to find the cause with the hopes of finding a cure. However, no time frame has been established as to when a cure might be found. If hunting were allowed you could be sure that no one would hunt honu with huge white tumors, further reducing the healthy breeding stock. In this case it seems like the culturally correct thing to do is to place a kapu on the harvesting of honu until this disease has been cured.

Individuals interested in more information on honu and the problems that they are facing should check out www.turtles.org on the web.

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