

# Turtle Diplomacy

After five years of distinguished service, six honu hele on.

By Bill Harby

**T**he big green sea turtle is frowning in that endearing turtle way, and no wonder. Dignity is difficult cooped up in a pen barely bigger around than your yard-long shell. Add to that being gawked at by two men who have just glued a transmitter and antenna onto your shell. Is there no escape?

Soon.

The two men—National Marine Fisheries Service turtle expert George Balazs and Hawai'i Wildlife Fund co-founder Bill Gilmartin—are grinning and elbowing each other like new dads.

Standing more calmly beside them is Uncle Charlie Maxwell, Hawaiian culture adviser to the Maui Ocean Center in Mā'alaea, which is where all this is happening. Uncle Charlie reminds our little group of marine biologists, students and me that many Hawaiians embrace ka honu (the green sea turtle) as their 'aumakua (family god). It's not hard to see why. This species has the philosopher's wise, impenetrable gaze.

Philosopher perhaps, but this particular turtle is also an ambassador. He and his five cousins here today are all career diplomats in the Hawaiian Sea Turtle Ambassador Program. They became part of a breeding project when Sea Life Park collected them from Hawai'i waters before the green sea turtle was declared "threatened" in 1978. Since 1976, several thousand hatchlings have been released to go forth and multiply. Beginning in 1989, some have been sent to aquaria like the Maui Ocean Center as "ambassadors."

But all these honu ambassadors have had to do is let people see them up close—their languid grace, their beautiful streaked carapace, which is mottled olive-brown, not green (the name comes from their greenish body fat, popular in soup in pre-diplomatic days, now federally forbidden).



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These six turtles—all about 5 years old, 100 pounds and in good health—are about to be released and retired, though they're still just youngsters in turtle time. (Green sea turtles are thought to live about 60 or 70 years.) These six turtles are even too young to have developed sexually, so we don't know whether they are males or females. All except one, a precocious boy who has been observed by his caretakers exhibiting a heretofore undocumented type of, uh, pleasurable behavior with his rear flippers ... etc.

But no one is thinking about that as the turtles are loaded into vans and trucks, and driven to an inlet past Mākena.

One by one, we tug them from the vehicle onto a blue plastic stretcher, and eight of us pick our way over the clattering smooth stones to knee-deep water. The turtles each start flapping their big flippers as they feel the water. We each reach out a hand for one last touch.

Pulling on my face mask, I help a Maui Ocean Center worker guide turtles out into deeper water. One honu makes a sharp left and swims right into me. I gently take his shell behind his head and in front of his tail the way I've seen the experts do, and point him toward open water. He takes deep strokes and disappears.

If he's like other turtle ambassadors, he'll establish his new coral consulate within a few miles of here. There, no doubt, the diplomatic pouches will be stuffed only with limu lunches. ⑤