

George H. Balazs

Special Achievement



George Balazs is one of the few Americans who have been instrumental in the comeback of a threatened species in a major part of its range. Among Hawaiians, his name is now synonymous with the *honu* (the Native Hawaiian word for the Hawaiian green sea turtle), and for good reason. For the past 34 years, this NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service biologist has devoted himself to the recovery of a species that might otherwise be extinct in the Hawaiian Archipelago if not for his dedication. He played a major role in getting the species added to the Endangered Species List in 1978, and then led efforts in subsequent years to uncover new information about the reptiles' biology and to educate the people of Hawaii about the islands' sea turtle heritage.

Balazs became interested in the plight of the green turtle in 1971 while working as a fledgling biologist for the University of Hawaii's Institute of Marine Biology. He began to question whether local island fishermen were harvesting the reptiles for their meat at a rate much higher than the turtle population could sustain. After studying historical accounts, he learned that the turtles nested at an isolated, uninhabited atoll, 500 miles from Honolulu. In 1973, he took it upon himself, in cooperation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to get to the atoll—no easy task—during nesting season. That year, he counted just 67 turtles. For years afterwards, he returned to the site, camping out for weeks at a time, to study the animals and lead their recovery program. Last year, nearly 500 green turtles nested there, and dozens more nested on the main Hawaiian Islands.

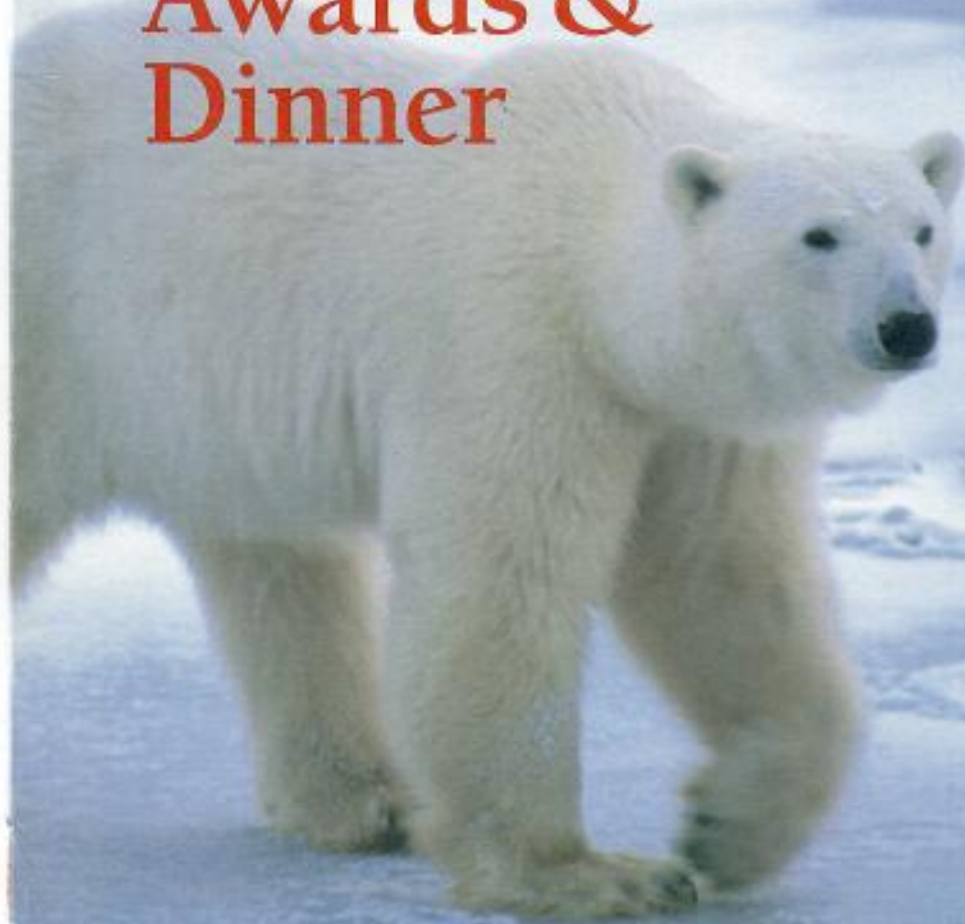
Balazs attributes much of the population increase to the protections of the Endangered Species Act. But he also believes that the statewide education effort, in which he has played a major role, has changed perceptions of Hawaii's residents of sea turtles from a source of food to a native species people are proud to protect. "He's a one-man show," says National Marine Fisheries Service veterinarian Robert Morris. "On his days off, what's George doing? He's out doing turtle work someplace. Not only the Hawaiian turtles, but in Japan and all over the world." Indeed, Balazs is now recognized as one of the world's foremost sea turtle experts. His work has been published in numerous scientific publications and he has served as a scientific advisor on a prestigious list of global turtle conservation groups.

In addition to his recovery work and observations at the breeding site, Balazs has gathered important new data about other aspects of the turtles' life cycle. Through the use of radio transmitters, for instance, he has discovered that the animals navigate hundreds of miles each year to feeding areas, without using any landmarks to get their bearings.

George Balazs has dedicated his career and life to the recovery of these magnificent animals and without his efforts the *honu* might be gone forever.

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