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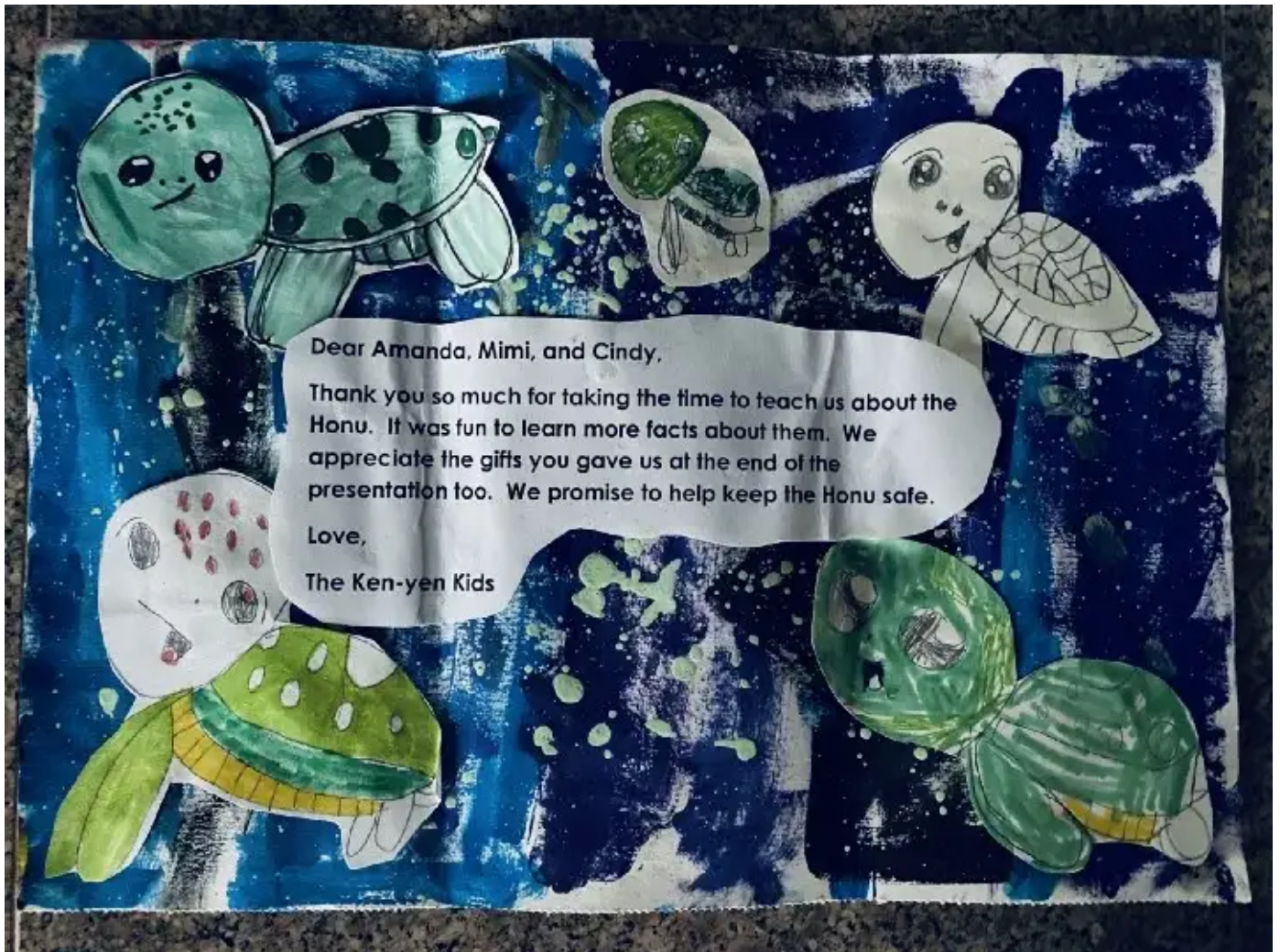
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On Becoming a Honu (Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle) Guardian



Attention parents: The turtles love your kids.



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Prologue: "Species come and go," said the uninterested tourist.

“Species come and go,” said the overwhelmed person having a bad day.

“Species come and go,” said the wildlife conservationist, “but that doesn’t mean we should accept being the reason they do or that we shouldn’t try to help the ones in peril live out a better life while they’re still here.

I’m starting this post referencing a concerning attitude about wildlife: That it doesn’t matter or that it is too late to do anything about it. As you can see from the above artwork and words submitted after another round of educational outreach, the prevailing attitude from the kids does not reflect an uncaring or hopeless regard of wild animals (in this case, the Hawaiian green sea turtles, or honu), but rather shows appreciation and stewardship, which is in keeping with humanity’s role in preserving the planet. As I attempted to note in my introductory post, we, as humans, are the higher-order thinkers and acting hands on Earth, and to not take this role seriously is not unlike an inexperienced pilot with a death wish flying a plane. Sounds scary and potentially fatal; I’d rather fly on a plane with a trained and caring pilot. Wouldn’t you?

Without further ado, let’s talk sea turtles ... There are seven species of sea turtles in the world: the giant leatherback, the green, the loggerhead, the flatback, the hawksbill, the olive ridley, and the Kemp’s ridley. Hawaii’s waters contain five of the species (no flatback or Kemp’s), but it is the Hawaiian green sea turtle (honu) that is most commonly encountered. Not only will you see honu near shore feasting on limu (seaweed), but they also haul out of the water to rest and warm up. It is because of this latter behavior that I got involved with a small, local nonprofit that “guards” two beaches in the state where the sea turtles congregate.

It was happenstance that I stumbled upon becoming a honu guardian. Unbeknownst to me because I don’t normally hang out on the beach at night, a community of honu was making a stir by coming out of the water post daytime beachgoer activity and spending the night sleeping off their limu. A friend of mine here (hi, Barbara!) was the one who raised my awareness that this was going on.



Daytime beachgoers.

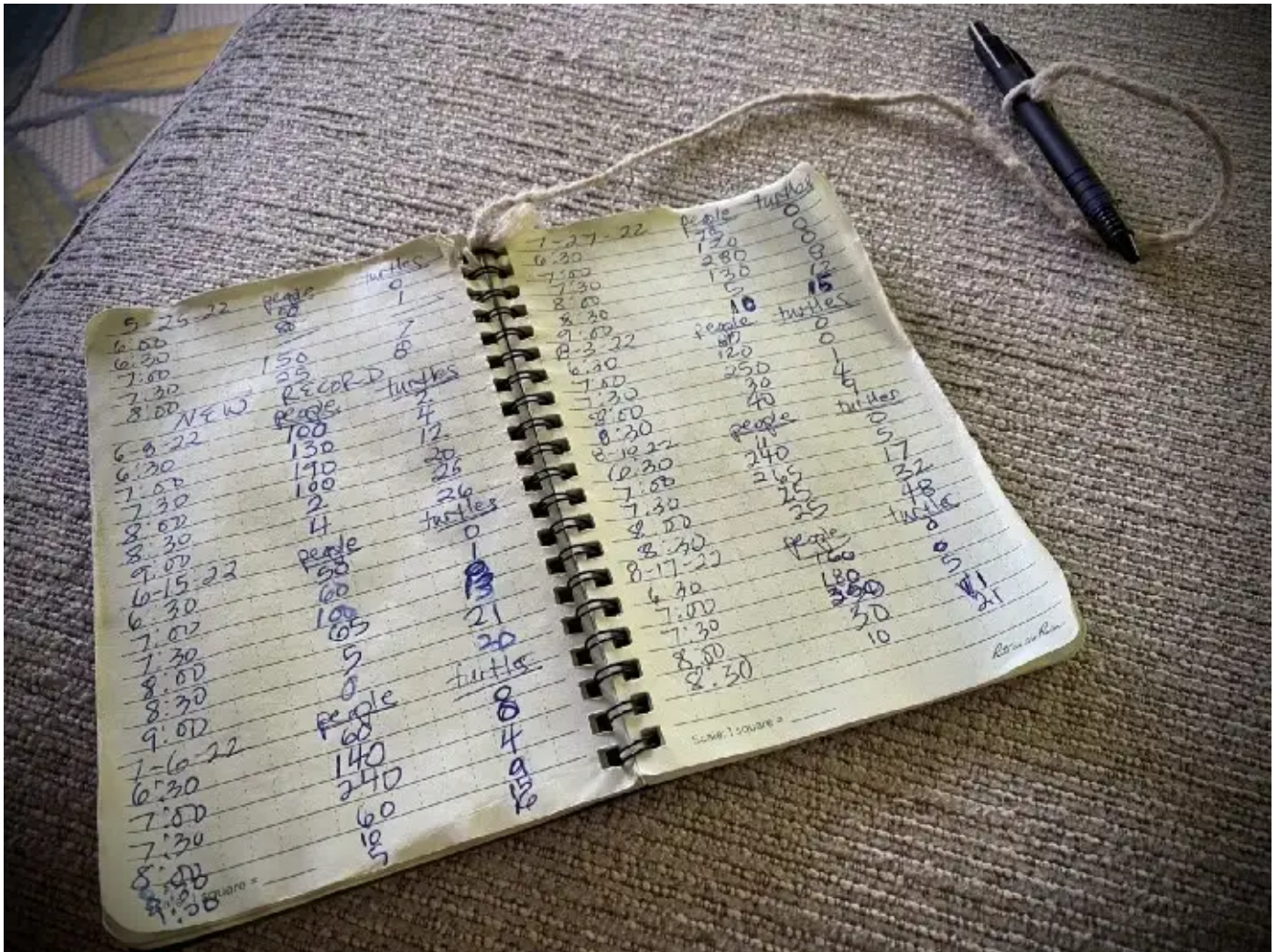


Nighttime beachgoers (those are turtles by the waterline, not rocks).

It all started with a snowbird in the area keeping watch over the turtles, trying to keep people from sitting on them and the like (they're a protected species, by the way), and that got the attention of this nonprofit, which got involved to further organize guardians to spend time on the beach teaching onlookers about the appropriate protocol around these wild animals (minimum of 10' viewing distance; no white lights at night). But moreover, **the guardians are there to educate people about the turtles, to answer questions, and, in general, help people better connect with the wild world they are in the midst of.**

Sounds simple enough, but it can be taxing to strike a balance between the love of the animals and natural world, which the guardians all have in common, and the face time with hundreds of people who surround the animals, as not all people are teachable, receptive, or sensible. And in a place with a constant flux of visitors, there's a lot of educational ground to cover, over and over again. I keep it mellow and approach it one conversation at a time, and I try to remember to enjoy the animals myself while I'm out there. **That's the essence of coexistence, in my mind: Knowledge, kindness, appreciation.**

I'm the proxy guardian trainer for the nonprofit, which is based on Oahu, and I do my best to impart this laid-back approach, though right now I'm working on revising the written instructions to clearly outline not getting into it on the beach with anyone, but definitely not with people out night fishing, for example, as there have apparently been some rows with volunteers asking fishers to turn off their lanterns. To begin to understand how important it is to respect humanity's role in wildlife conservation, take a look at this article from *The New York Times*, now almost ten years old, but just as relevant: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/magazine/who-would-kill-a-monk-seal.html>. I read this in preparation for my work with the Hawaiian monk seals, but the understanding that is required of people's social and economic status is critical across the board when you're out there promoting coexistence. **Humans will always take precedence, that is how the world works, so we need to respect their needs, and eating is the most important one.** I will not discuss the larger issues around the fishing industry in this post, but people wading and bait fishing around sea turtles — this we can live with.



My beach-shift people and turtle count notebook (it's waterproof, including the pen!).

As I write this, I'm also preparing a training video to touch upon these takeaways for the guardians, and there's some more outreach on the calendar, which is always great fun, as kids are ripe for learning and, of course, they are tasked with carrying on into the future — it's best to work with them while they're still curious and not set in their ways.

On that note, here are the most common questions and answers about the honu:

- How old are the turtles? *When the turtles are about 36" they are (sexually) mature, and that happens when they are 25–30 years old. They can live to be 80 and reach 400–500 pounds.*
- How can you tell boys from girls? *Mature males have longer tails.*

· What's wrong with that turtle that has growths all over it (is it dead)? *The turtles are susceptible to fibropapilloma virus, which is related to herpes. There's nothing we can do to treat the turtles and as long as they're going about their business (moving, eating, etc.), they're still in the game. Polluted water does not help the turtles' health, so we need to do our best to keep the waters clean.*

· Are the turtles nesting? *The turtles are resting or basking. They come out of the water to sleep out of harm's way and warm up. From May to October, they nest about 400 miles up the northwest atolls.*

· Is basking a seasonal occurrence? *The turtles on Oahu have shown us that once honu find a "home" like this, they will continue to return. Given that each turtle decides when it wants to nest (every 2–8 years or so), there isn't a regular pattern of comings and goings.*

It's hard to say what the future holds for the honu, as habitat loss will continue to push them into more populated areas, increasing the need for coexistence. With climate change affecting the sex of hatchlings (i.e., turtle nests in warmer sands translate into more females than males), we might be a few generations away from the end of the line, or perhaps Nature will swoop in with an adaptation. In the meanwhile, we **educate and hope people can overcome ambivalence or something worse when it comes to giving these animals a chance to be on the same planet with us, because they already are.**

Coming soon: I'll introduce my work with the Hawaiian monk seals!

Thanks for reading, and peace,
Amanda

Epilogue: God bless Freya, the walrus recently snuffed out by Norwegian authorities. Norway: Consider educating people about coexistence before you kill a wild animal simply for doing what it does. If someone killed us for swimming, sleeping, and eating, we'd all be dead.