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1 August, 1986

To: George Balazs

From: John Henderson

Subj: Observations of seal/hatchling interaction

On July 23, 1986 (double check date w/Marilyn) on East Island, Marilyn and I were watching a group of 80-100 green sea turtle hatchlings make their way to the water from a recently erupted nest. The time was dusk...about 2030 hrs (I think), and the location was Sector 2, about 30 m west of the old latrine pier.

A recently weaned monk seal pup was swimming in the shallows, 1-2 m from shore, generally investigating the bottom, and rolling in the waves. The identity of the pup was not determined, hence the precise time after weaning isn't known, but I estimate it had been weaned about a month. As the seal swam back and forth, it came into proximity of a hatchling which had just entered the water. (At this time I jokingly remarked to Marilyn something to the effect of "Let's watch this seal eat a hatchling".) When the hatchling was near the seal's head, the seal wheeled in the water, toward the hatchling, as if to further investigate it. The seal wheeled for about one 360-degree turn, and I lost sight of the hatchling, even though I was watching pretty closely. (It was nearly dark, however). The hatchling disappeared from my view in the surge of water created by the seal when it wheeled around. The seal then continued on towards the pier.

As the seal moved on toward the pier, it did not obviously have anything in its mouth. Weaners at this age won't sieze something in their mouth and immediately swallow it; mouthing an item for some time is generally the rule. Thus, I don't think the weaner actually ate the hatchling, or even siezed it in its mouth, but certainly investigated it for at least the 5 sec or so the weaner was wheeling around, after which time the weaner probably lost track of the hatchling.

Other hatchlings were entering the water in the vicinity as the weaner rolled in the waves and swam back & forth, but I saw no other incidents. Furthermore, it did not appear that the weaner had seen the hatchling prior to swimming toward it, but merely encountered the hatchling by chance. Nonetheless, because weaners often investigate items by "mouthing" them, I would say that an encounter such as this could result in mortality of a hatchling if the weaner were sufficiently "interested" and able to maintain sight of the hatchling.