

Turtles basking on isle shores confound scientists

By Dave Smith
Tribune-Herald

PUNALUU — At first glance the grayish mass on the beach just above the wash of the waves appears to be a rock.

It's only when you get close enough to see the head and flippers that its identity is obvious.

But what isn't so easily seen is the change in behavior that occurs when green sea turtles leave the

ocean to bask.

Scientists say they don't know how to explain this "terrestrial emergence," but they do know that it is a new behavior, at least for turtles on the Big Island.

Basking is well known in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands more than 600 miles away where green sea turtles living off the Big Island go to nest. But it is only in the past five years — and particularly in the last two — that it has

been observed here.

No one knows why the green sea turtle acts so, although some theorize it has something to do with the halting 20 years ago of the rampant taking of the turtles for meat.

George Balazs, a turtle expert with the National Marine Fisheries Service, said basking certainly would have proved fatal in years past.

"If they did it in the 1960s they would be gone from the population in 24 hours," he said.

"We don't understand exactly why they are doing it, but it seems to be a learned behavior," Balazs said.

Balazs said the turtles basking at the beach at Punaluu seem to be the tamest, tolerating the stares and occasional touching from tourists visiting the most accessible black sand beach on the Big Island.

But in other Big Island loca-

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tions where basking occurs, such as on the lava shores off Puako, they aren't as tolerant of the human intrusion. Balazs said he has watched turtles there turn and head for the water at the mere approach of humans.

By attaching a monitoring device to a pre-adult turtle's shell, Balazs and other researchers found that the animal spent only a little over 3 percent of its time basking in stretches lasting from seven minutes to 15 hours. Although the basking might last into nighttime, it was never begun after dark.

The rest of the time the turtle spent foraging for seaweed in shallow waters, primarily a type of algae, and resting underwater on dives that can last well over an hour.

There is an ongoing debate as to the effect human contact has on the basking turtles.

The hundreds of tourists who arrive at Punaluu by car or bus must pass a sign asking that they not bother the sleeping turtles, telling them that they are not sick and do not need assistance.

But many visitors, like Luana

Stephens of Nashville, are more interested in getting to the turtles than reading the notice.

"I looked at the sign but I didn't read it," Stephens said.

Vendors at the beach, including Punaluu resident Jeanette Howard who also helps monitor turtle activity, distribute handouts asking that people stay 10 feet from the animals. But they still see people dumping water on the basking turtles, apparently thinking they were drying out, and even trying to carry them back to the ocean. Howard said here have also been instances of people trying to write on their shell.

Hawaiian green sea turtles are a threatened species and it is illegal to disturb them. But Balazs believes that remedying that through enforcement is not the solution.

He said having tour bus drivers inform their passengers would go a long way toward establishing "proper honu behavior," referring to the Hawaiian name for the turtle.

But according to Larry Katahira,

who is overseeing the hawksbill turtle recovery efforts in the nearby Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, that was tried several years ago with only limited success.

Balazs disagrees with those who say additional signs are needed, although the presence of Katahira in his park uniform on the beach near the turtle generated numerous questions about the animal and its behavior — and also appeared to give pause to those about to touch the basking turtle.

Katahira said there is no question that the situation provides a unique experience as well as a chance to educate the public about the turtle and its plight.

Balazs agrees, adding that the turtles don't appear to be bothered by a few humans nearby.

"I don't think touching them for a short time is harmful to the turtles," he said.

But he said being surrounded by a crowd is a different matter, which is why he advocates the 10-foot stand-



T-H photo by William Ing

A visitor from Japan poses for a snapshot beside the bilingual signs at Punaluu Beach.

off.

And of course there is the legal issue. "Images of crowded turtles is not what we want for preservation of turtles," he said.