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commission probes possible protection for green sea turtles

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Should there be a law against catching green sea turtles and selling their meat for restaurant food or their shells for tourist curios?

The State Animal Species Advisory Commission battled that question around for three hours yesterday, but postponed a decision on whether the big turtles are an endangered species.

However, commission members and scientific experts present did agree research is needed to determine whether commercial fishing is a threat to the turtle population. They approved a motion to ask the Legislature for research funds.

The commission could not decide whether to recommend partial or total protection for the turtles while the proposed three-year study is undertaken. Members appointed a subcommittee to explore that question further over the next month.

HAWAII'S GREEN sea turtles form a distinct local population which drifts up and down the island chain. They rarely come up to shore on the populated islands, but their breeding grounds at French Frigate Shoals are the largest green sea turtle hatchery in the United States.

The adult turtles average about 275 pounds, and giants of 500 pounds are sometimes caught. It's believed they live to be 150 years old.

Two marine-science experts told the commission yester-

day there is good reason for immediate turtle-fishing controls.

"I don't think we have the luxury of time that some might think," said Eugene Kridler, local wildlife administrator for the Federal Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

Kridler said his agency protects the turtles' breeding grounds in the leeward islands, but he said such protection would mean nothing if adult turtles are killed before they can breed.

He estimated commercial fishermen last year killed about 270 turtles. "The entire adult population is probably in the low thousands," said Kridler.

Michio Takata, director of the State's fish and game division, said his agency has no way of knowing how many additional turtles were killed by sport fishermen or divers.

GEORGE BALAZS, a research biologist with the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, told the commission that

many other states or Pacific nations have passed laws protecting the turtle. The only Hawaii law now on the books, he said, forbids the shooting or spearing of turtles when they are killed for commercial purposes.

He particularly praised a one-year-old Tahiti law that allows local people to hunt and eat turtles, but forbids any slaughter of wild turtles for commercial purposes.

Seconded Kridler, "It's a shame the amount of animals taken just for their shells."

Some commission members agreed that the turtle population seems to be on the decline, but others said long-range studies are needed to justify restrictions on fishermen.

Dr. Alan C. Ziegler, a Bishop Museum zoologist, said the increasing numbers of turtles being caught by local fishermen could reflect a surplus of turtles. He said he could not agree to restrictions until such questions are answered because "I can't do this to the commercial fishermen."

do Hawaii's turtles need protection?

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ON ANOTHER matter, the commission endorsed the circulation of posters urging preservation of the Hawaiian crow, a Big Island species with only 23 known survivors. Commissioners suggested the poster be reworded slightly because its present focus on hunters might produce a "backlash" effect among some hunters.

Bill Mull, acting president of the Hawaii Audubon Society, suggested similar posters about all endangered bird species. He said the Audubon Society might help finance the educational effort.

At the meeting's close, Taka ta briefed the commission on State Administration legislative proposals for 1973. One of these would change a law which now permits anyone to harvest coral from any area. The State Department of Land and Natural Resources wants the authority to keep certain reef areas off-limits to coral collectors.