

Sea turtles share their islet home

□ East Island is an assembly line for green sea turtles

By Susan Scott
Special to the Star-Bulletin

EAST ISLAND, Hawaii — This 11-acre island in the French Frigate Shoals belongs to Hawaii's green sea turtles.

Oh, they share it with monk seals, birds and occasionally a few people, but the essence of the island is turtles.

These huge reptiles bask on the beaches during the day and dig out the rest of the island with nesting pits at night.

Because of this, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with the National Marine Fisheries Service, sets up a turtle camp here each summer to collect information about Hawaii's green sea turtle population.

Little is known about these animals, which are threatened by extinction and protected by federal and state laws.

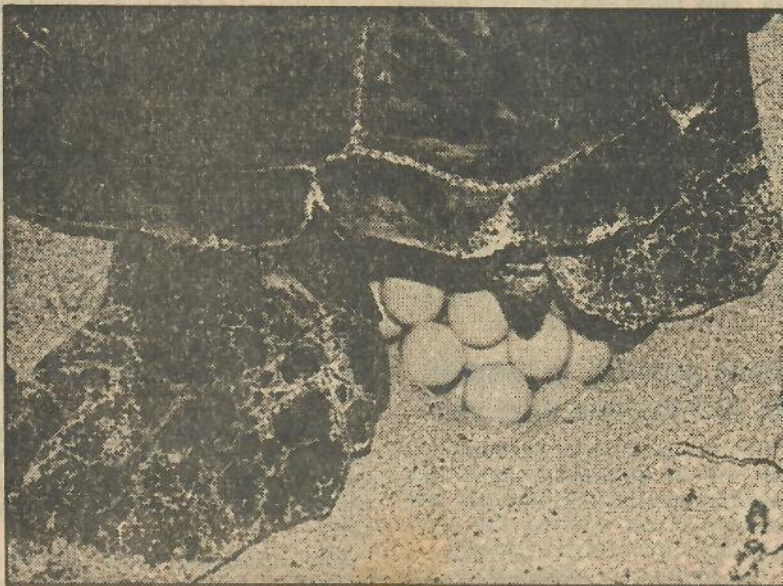
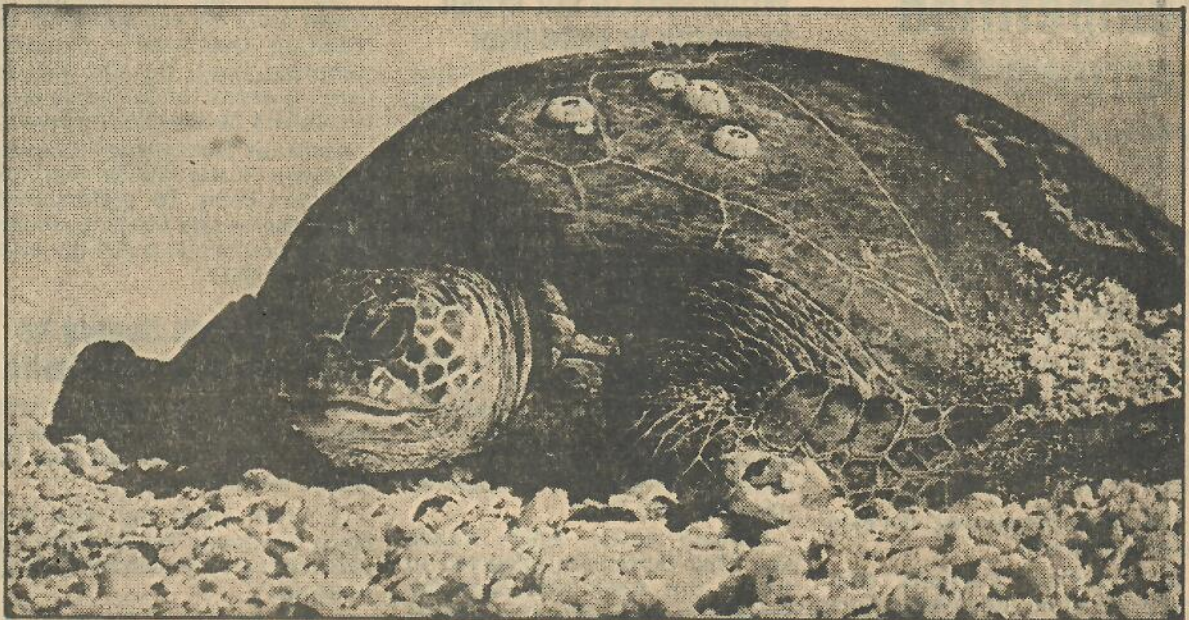
The camp on East Island is a tiny two-tent affair with few of the amenities of the Tern Island field station six miles away.

Two Fish and Wildlife Service employees take turns working here, four nights on and four nights off. They work at night because their job is to tag, number and record information about female turtles that have crawled up to the land to lay eggs, a behavior done almost always at night.

The hours are long and the working conditions are sometimes difficult. Glynnis Nakai, a temporary biological aide for Fish and Wildlife, is one of the "turtle people" as they're called here.

"You won't believe this, but I wear panty hose when I'm working here at night," she said. "This sand is full of ticks from the albatrosses and I'm sensitive to the bites. The panty hose protect my legs."

Nakai's small camp looked di-



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A green sea turtle, above, with acorn barnacles on its shell basks on the beach at East Island in the French Frigate Shoals, while another, left, tends her eggs. Sea turtles dig holes in the sand to deposit their eggs. As a result, both East and Tern islands are like obstacle courses because of pits left by nesting turtles.

sheveled and she was tired. She had just spent a long couple of days and nights holding the camp together during the remnants of a tropical storm.

The canvas awnings had blown down so she had no protection from the sun, and most of her supplies were wet.

Although it wasn't time to switch yet, the other turtle person, Michael Moser, had come to East from Tern Island by outboard to help Nakai put the camp back together.

But before work, they shared a cold beer from a small propane refrigerator, one of the few luxuries at the isolated East Island camp.

It's hard to imagine that a busy Coast Guard station was once here, but a lonely telephone pole stands as a reminder of this island's military history.

Inside a wooden box nailed to the pole is an old photo showing rows of Quonset huts and a poem about the godliness of this island.

Now, the sea turtles jockey with monk seals and birds for the best beach space. It's not uncommon to see these animals cuddled up, a seal and turtle sleeping side by side or an albatross sitting next to or even on a turtle.

Hawaiian green sea turtles are among the few populations of turtles worldwide that bask on beaches. Most stay in the ocean full-time except during nesting time.

Right now, these greens look like team turtles because the researchers have painted large white numbers on the dark turtle backs. This allows people to see which turtle is laying eggs in

the sand pits at night without getting too close.

The paint wears off quickly, sometimes too quickly, so the turtles don't swim around with numbers on them for long.

More than 90 percent of the Hawaiian turtle population nests on East and Whale-Skate Islands, islands within the French Frigate Shoals refuge.

Many of the turtles that are here now will migrate back to the main Hawaiian Islands after the nesting season to graze on algae along the coasts.

Green sea turtles once nested on the main Hawaiian islands, but people have killed them, taken their eggs and taken over the beaches until the animals were driven to nest far away from people.

The French Frigate Shoals is their last haven.