

The green sea turtle —

A green sea turtle can take a long time to die.

Last May, an island visitor found one at Dillingham Field, flapping painfully against the sand with a spear through its head. This incident has been one of several reported to the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife officers during the past few months.

The finding of several turtles dead of spear wounds and some drowned and wrapped in anchor lines at Kailua Beach underscores the worry of some turtle specialists and some who fish that existence of the species may be at stake because people are not recognizing the laws protecting the green sea turtle.

Since 1978, the green sea turtle has been listed by the federal government as a threatened species. The designation of "threatened" means that, with protection, an animal species can recover its numbers enough to survive.

A threatened species is not as bad off as one that is "endangered" — faced with imminent extinction.

It has been illegal by federal



from
the sea
mike markrich

law to take turtles since they were put on the threatened list. (A state law now protects them as well.) Before that, it was legal to take turtles over 36 inches (shell size) for personal consumption, but not to sell.

Pacific green sea turtles are found in certain locations throughout the Hawaiian archipelago. They live in other areas, too, and are protected by the U.S. government in waters off California and parts of the Trust Territory. In the Trust Territory, there are some exemptions given for people to catch turtles for basic food needs.

A relative, the Atlantic green sea turtle, is found off Florida and is also on the protected list.

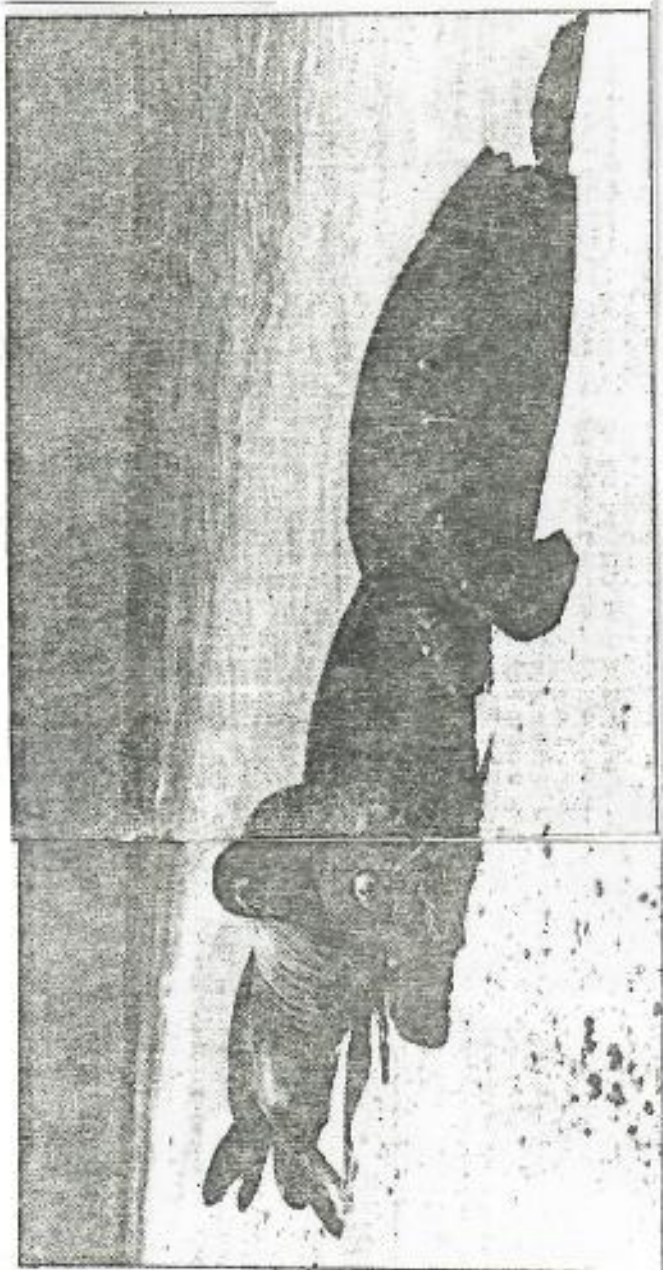
Pacific green turtles eat limu such as green lettuce and wawae'iole. Their shells are black

with patterns of gold, olive and yellow. Scientists believe it takes them anywhere from 10 to 50 years to reach sexual maturity. Approximately 90 percent of their breeding takes place in the Leeward Hawaiian Islands.

The green turtles nest every two years. The mean annual production of hatchlings is about 26,500, but only a small percentage is thought to make it to adulthood. Some are eaten by tiger sharks and groupers while others succumb to weakness and disease.

Turtle specialists such as George Balazs of National Marine Fisheries believe that legal protection is necessary. Says Balazs, "If the young turtles keep getting knocked off, we are never going to get a recovery."

Balazs is in the midst of an in-depth study of the green sea turtle. His work, which includes



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radio tracking of the turtles, was started in 1973.

According to Gene Nitta of the fisheries service, a status report will be prepared in 1983 to determine whether it is feasible for turtles to be taken.

Other agencies and people who fish, such as Alike Cooper of the Big Island, while deploring spearing of turtles, believe the turtle population is strong enough at this time to support the taking of turtles for subsistence purposes.

Cooper believes strongly in "the aboriginal rights" of Hawaiians to fish for a resource that is important to them. As Cooper explains, "My family for as far as I know has always eaten turtle . . . Hawaiians always ate turtle. It's part of our culture and heritage."

Cooper has gotten support from Gov. George Ariyoshi in his effort to get an exemption for native Hawaiians to catch

turtles. Ariyoshi wrote him last month that "we agree with you that the controlled subsistence taking of turtle should be allowed as this is a traditional activity compatible with the protection and management of a valuable Hawaiian resource."

Abraham Piianaia of the University of Hawaii acknowledged that turtle was an important part of the diet of all classes of Hawaiians. "I know of no edict that restricted turtles to royalty," Piianaia said.

Piianaia said that he feels strongly that the sea turtles must not be faced with extinction. "Whether or not a guy has aboriginal rights is beside the point. The main thing is that the animal survives," he said.

One man who is opposed to the movement to have turtles taken off the threatened species list by the state is Rene Sylva of Maui, who is said to have

caught more than 1,000 turtles in his lifetime.

Sylva, who for many years used a special net to catch them, explained. "I agree with the law even though it ended my turtle eating. In fact, I asked for it to be even stronger."

Sylva remembers the large numbers of turtles that were around in the 1940s and says he stopped fishing for turtles when he realized that their numbers were declining. When he stopped taking turtles, he says he burned his nets so there would be no going back.

"Even with restrictions, they shouldn't take them," Sylva said. "Since I'm a Hawaiian, maybe I should disagree with it but I don't think that they are going to come back in my lifetime. A law is like a lock: It wasn't made to keep a thief out, but to keep an honest man honest."