

Hawaii Kai scientist's efforts help restore dwindling population of green sea turtles

By **CARRIE O'CONNOR**
Staff Writer

HAWAII KAI — Hawaii Kai scientist George Balazs views the Big Island's celebration this weekend honoring the green sea turtle as a satisfying culmination of his 20-year effort to rebuild the reptile's dwindling population.

"I am very excited about this," said Balazs, a National Marine Fisheries Service

expert who will be among the guests attending "He La Honu — Turtle Day '95." "I have dreamed about this and thought about this for many years."

The event, set for Saturday morning at Punaluu Beach Park, features the unveiling of a large bronze disc that will be mounted for permanent display at the park.

The disc, approximately 4 feet in diameter, is a creation of Maui artist Dale Zarella and depicts the goddess Kauila on the back of a giant sea turtle.

The disc is designed around the Ka'u legend about Kauila, a sea-turtle goddess who is supposed to have turned herself into a child so that she could play with children at Punaluu Bay and keep watch over them.

Balazs is an adviser for the federally funded Honu Project, a non-profit organization now in its fifth year that is dedicated to conserving endangered

sea turtles worldwide.

He said it is interesting that the Hawaiian legend only recently surfaced, even though his studies on the turtles started in the 1970s. However, the myth has strengthened efforts to protect the turtles, which are part of the 1978 U.S. Endangered Species Act.

"This is a legitimate myth," Balazs said. "(Artist) Herb Kane gave rebirth to the legend. It is a supernatural thing

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almost for a rural community that is 40-some miles down from the Volcano with one radio station and a monthly newspaper."

The message of the environmentally conscious community is so strong that even tourists understand the vulnerability of the sea turtles, he said.

"The tour buses stop there," Balazs said. "They see, they watch and there is an educational awareness that we need to protect these animals."

Before the act was in place,

people hunted turtles and killed them with nets, spear guns, firearms and grappling hooks attached to bamboo poles. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the animals were sold to resort restaurants.

Since 1976, the federal government has enabled scientists to examine, tag and free 183 green turtles at Punaluu. Local scientists have since recaptured approximately 34 per-

cent of the turtles and freed them again. Scientists at French Frigate Shoals also have discovered three of the tagged turtles.

Balazs said more sea turtles are alive today.

"There is a definite increase," he said. "The turtles are very tame, they are out during the day. Generally, you see about 20 turtles a day there in the water."