

Date: Mon, 1 Jun 1998 20:12:34 -1000 (HST)  
From: "George H. Balazs" <gbalazs@honlab.nmfs.hawaii.edu>  
To: gbalazs@honlab.nmfs.hawaii.edu  
Subject: French Frigate Shoals- 25 Years

Date: Mon, 1 Jun 1998 14:11:27 -1000 (HST)  
From: George H. Balazs <gbalazs@honlab.nmfs.hawaii.edu>  
To: Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation <CTURTLE@lists.ufl.edu>  
Subject: French Frigate Shoals- 25 Years

Due to some good luck, perseverance and a year or two of dreaming about it, 25 years ago today I touched sand for the first time at French Frigate Shoals. A DC-3 "Gooney Bird" aircraft, of World War II vintage, put us down on the 3000' Tern Island gravel runway. Ironically the landing was made through a mass of swirling sooty terns (see National Geographic, May 1978).

I had traveled to these remote islets 500 miles up the Hawaiian chain from Honolulu to start a systematic tagging and monitoring study of the green turtles nesting there. One that would, I had hoped, last for "three years" with seed-money kindly granted by the New York Zoological Society under Dr. Wayne King.

Not much was known then about such things as how many green turtles nested in Hawaii, what nesting cycles they displayed, the turtles' dispersal throughout Hawaii (or maybe elsewhere in the Pacific), growth rates of the youngsters, and time to maturity. However, what was clearly known at that time, in Honolulu and on Maui and other inhabited islands of Hawaii, was that a good market and high price existed in the restaurant trade for green turtle meat. And that the turtles had no legal protection and could be caught pretty easily in certain places using modern scuba gear and relatively cheap synthetic tangle nets.

I would have scarcely remembered this date of June 1st, or given it any notice, had it not been for Ursula Keuper-Bennett's sharp eye for historical moments, and deep appreciation for the Hawaiian honu that husband Peter and her dive with each summer off of Maui. And talk about frequently on Cturtle. Thank you Ursula and Peter, for your involvement and for your affectionate website segment on French Frigate Shoals (<http://www.turtles.org/ffsland0.htm>). During the 25 years of our tagging and monitoring program (the 26th season this year), much has been learned almost entirely through the collaboration, partnerships, and friendships built with other researchers and lay persons. Peter and Ursula exemplify in the finest fashion a portion of those many individuals.

For these past 25 years the tagging of turtles to achieve individual or cohort recognition has been the "gold-standard" foundation of our work. About 2000 nesting greens have been tagged and nearly 3900 others, mainly immatures, in numerous Hawaiian coastal foraging habitats. However, technological advances in tags, and our current financial ability to purchase them, have allowed us to now exclusively use PIT tags. The chances appear to be greater for these tags to be retained by our turtles when another 25 years pass by.

Based on our annual number of nesters, and in-water sampling of immatures, and anecdotal reports by recreational divers, green turtles in Hawaii show very encouraging signs of population recovery since being protected in 1978 under the US Endangered Species Act. Yes, we have this nagging tumor problem that is severe in individuals at many locations. The work on this disease is essential and continues by an array of respected pathologists, virologists and epidemiologists. Far better today, however, to look at

the bright side. The numbers are up throughout Hawaii. And the road to population recovery is indeed possible, given some patience, the passage of time, and hard work by many individuals respecting one another's diversity of opinions, talents and efforts.

Aloha, George Balazs