

Turtle count increases at Maui Ocean Center

By **CARRIE ROBERTSON**
For The Maui News

MAALAEA — Two juvenile green sea turtles flew, not swam, from Oahu to Maui recently to take up residence in the turtle lagoon at the Maui Ocean Center aquarium.

The ocean center acquired all six of its turtles from Sea Life Park on Oahu, where they were the progeny of captive green sea turtles.

The two new turtles, which hatched from the same nest less than a year ago at Sea Life Park, were flown to Maui to join four other turtles that have been thriving at the aquarium since its opening in March.

Flying turtles from island to island is fairly simple, according to the MOC's head curator, Aharon Miroz. "You put them in a foam box for protection and cover the shell and body with wet towels to keep them damp during the journey," he said.

The MOC received the two turtles following a visit by Sea Life Park veterinarian Bob Braun, who did a semiannual inspection in June. "Dr. Braun was pleased with the progress of our first four turtles," said MOC Assistant Curator John Gorman, "so he allowed us to receive two more in July."

"The Maui Ocean Center turtles are doing very well," reported Braun. "They're eating well and are much bigger than turtles their age would be in the wild, mostly due to the more high-quality food that's available," he said. "Though they're not overfed, I suggested that we increase the percentage of vegetation in the feedings, which will slow their growth rate a little."

Because the young turtles have been hand-fed squid, fish and shrimp since they hatched, these air-breath-

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— **Bob Braun**
Sea Life Park veterinarian

ing reptiles appear very robust, active and healthy, Gorman said. "We've been adding Romaine lettuce to the turtles' mostly seafood diet," he said.

The biggest two measure about 16 inches long and turned 2 years old last month. The middle two each measure about 12 inches long and will celebrate their first birthday this month. The newest two measure less than a foot and are less than 1 year old.

Researchers estimate that green sea turtles may live to be 80 to 100 years old in the wild.

In addition to being a little smaller, the new turtles look a little different from the others. Their shells are more slate-colored, while the other four have a reddish tint to their shells. Since all six turtles are still young, it's too early to distinguish their gender, Braun said, explaining that when they reach sexual maturity at about age 25 the tails on males grow much longer than those of females.

The MOC naturalists feed the turtles twice a day, making sure each gets enough to eat, according to Operations Manager Chris Quarre.

The six turtles are fed twice daily, at 11:15 a.m. and again at 3 p.m., but can be viewed from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

After a filling meal of seafood and salad, the turtles often scoot up onto the sandy beach at the edge of the

turtle pond to bask in the sun while digesting.

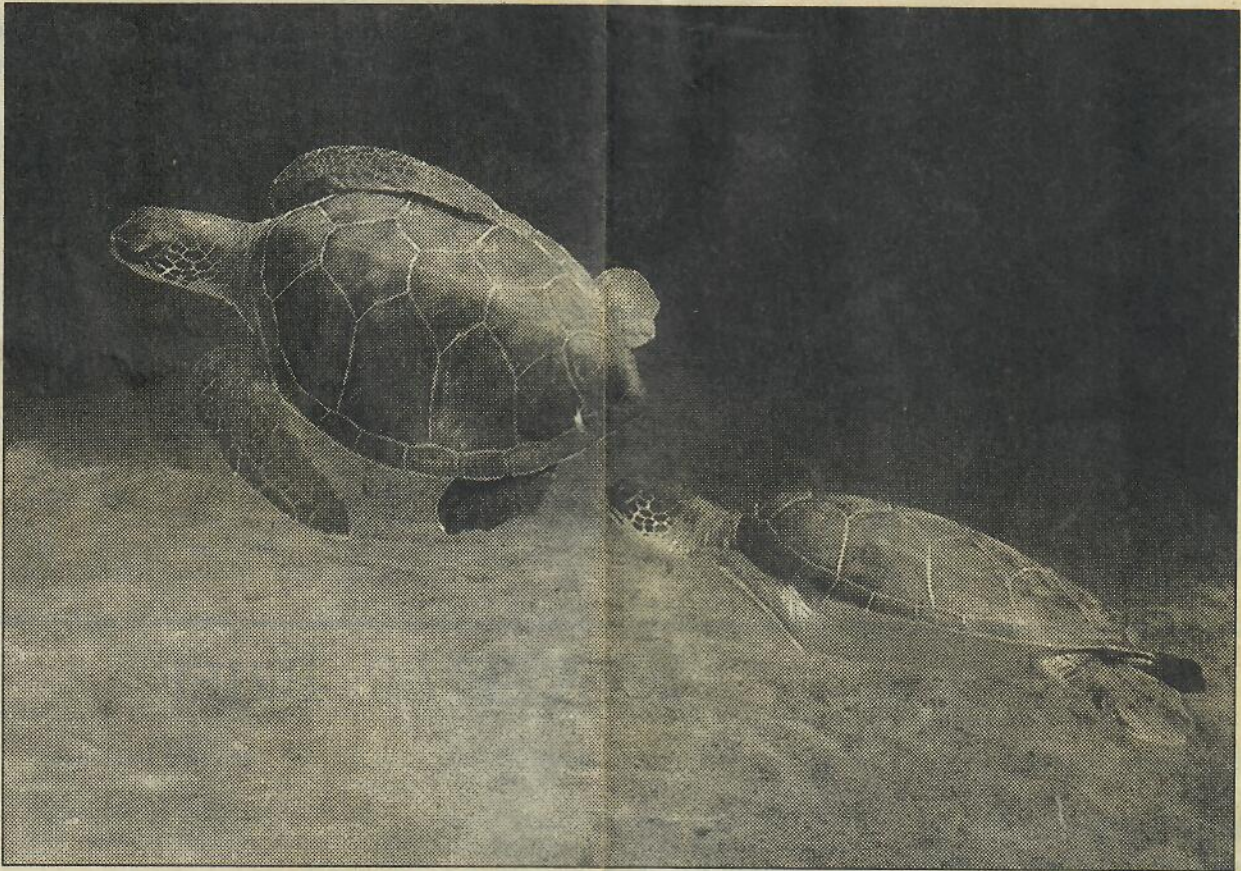
The turtles' parents mated in captivity at Sea Life Park, where they have lived for more than two decades. All of the larger turtles at the Oahu facility were captured before the federal government began protecting the species, Braun said.

The green sea turtle, previously hunted to near-extinction for its meat, was put under federal protection in 1978 and is now considered a threatened species, protected against harassment of any kind. Both Sea Life Park and the Maui Ocean Center have permits to keep the turtles in captivity strictly for educational purposes.

"As part of its conservation efforts, Sea Life Park has provided a beach in its turtle facility to encourage hatchlings," Braun said. The park has hatched about 120 baby turtles this year, most of which will be tagged and released into Hawaiian waters. Others will be kept for a few years until they're big enough to send out on loan to Mainland aquariums to help promote education about the threatened species, he said.

Once the MOC turtles are big enough, they, too, will be released and probably replaced with smaller turtles, Gorman said, adding, "Since the turtles' diet is 70 percent vegetable matter in the wild, they should be able to fend for themselves when released."

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CARRIE ROBERTSON photo

The Maui Ocean Center in Maalaea recently acquired two green sea turtles from Sea Life Park on Oahu. The two turtles, less than 1 year old, are the

progeny of captive turtles. The aquarium now has six turtles in its turtle lagoon, all of which are on loan from Sea Life Park.