

Turtles drowning in a sea of plastic

By Helen Altorn

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Sea turtle specialist George Balazs stroked a young turtle weighing only a few pounds — a size he says is rarely seen in the ocean.

This one was raised from a hatchling at Sea Life Park, where it lives happily and safely with family members.

Their relatives on the high seas aren't so lucky. They are in constant danger, threatened by predators and human garbage — nets, rope, pieces of plastic, glass bottles, strapping tape, wire, oil and much more.

Seven turtles have been found dead on Hawaii shores since 1984 when an international conference was held here to focus on debris problems, Balazs said.

"All seven were clogged with debris in their lower guts that was compacted in hard balls."

That may not seem like a high number, the National Marine Fisheries Service scientist said. "But we consider that the tip of the iceberg."

Studies done since 1985 by the National Wildlife Health Center show that 16 of Hawaii's 18 spe-

cies of seabirds feed on plastic debris, said Stewart Fefer, refuge manager of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

More than 90 percent of Laysan albatrosses sampled had plastic in their system, said the Honolulu migratory bird biologist.

Adult birds are able to throw up the material, but they feed their chicks until they can fly, and the chicks can't regurgitate, he said. "So they are more affected than adults. The growth rate of the chicks is reduced, and a fair amount of plastic may affect the chicks' survival."

At a news conference yesterday highlighting meetings here next week on marine debris, Balazs, Fefer and John Henderson of the Fisheries Service's Honolulu laboratory talked of the threats.

Henderson is involved with efforts to protect and increase endangered Hawaiian monk seals, among other animals suffering from floating trash.

Richard S. Shomura, former director of the laboratory and chairman of the Second International Conference on Marine Debris, said the first workshop in 1984 primarily involved biologists

and derelict nets entangling marine life.

But the problems have escalated tremendously, and many agencies are worried, he said. More than 200 marine, wildlife and social scientists, economists, lawyers, government and industry officials, and others will explore the issues Monday through Friday at the Ala Moana Hotel, Shomura said.

The public must be alerted to the problems because a new federal law slaps penalties up to \$50,000 on any watercraft dumping plastics in the ocean, said Coast Guard Capt. Gordon Piche. It will require self-policing through education, he said.

The dilemma is that most of the debris does not wash ashore but floats in the ocean where it snares and entangles marine life and is eaten by them, Balazs said.

Young sea turtles are particularly vulnerable because they live in areas where currents come together with natural food and floating objects, he said.

These turtles are seldom seen in the ocean until they are about 15 pounds because they live at or near the ocean surface, drifting



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Scientist George Balazs holds a young sea turtle that's safe with its family at Sea Life Park from dangerous ocean debris.

and swimming, he said. Consequently, it's difficult to assess the impact, he said.

But the seven dead turtles found in Hawaii in recent years contained no seaweed or shore food — only plastic from the high seas, Balazs said.

"It's not just whether we care

about albatrosses and turtles, which we do, but the quality of the entire environment we're a part of," Fefer said.

"Some of these things could affect the food chain, of which we're at the top.

"The ultimate concern is for the survival of humans."