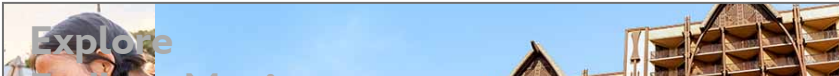


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Emotions run high as sea turtles take over popular Hawaii beaches

Sea turtles are basking on Kauai's Poipu Beach like never before

By **Ashley Harrell**

Nov 11, 2023



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A large crowd forms around sunset at Poipu Beach to witness a spectacle of basking Hawaiian green turtles.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

Just before sunset on one of Hawaii's premier stretches of beach, a sea turtle drags itself out of the surf and onto the sand to bask, as humans sunbathe and frolic nearby. A handful of people gather around the scaly, prehistoric-looking reptile, who naps peacefully despite the audience.



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When a second turtle drifts into the shallow cove, it prompts squeals of excitement from the crowd. Then comes another. And another. And another.

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Soon, about a dozen Hawaiian green sea turtle scooted ashore and fallen asleep on Poipu Be

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of Kauai. In response, a team of volunteers get to work, setting up safety cones and signage to keep back the semi-circle of onlookers sipping cocktails and snapping photos from 10 feet away. That's as close as the public is legally allowed to get to green sea turtles, thanks to their status as a threatened species.

While someone plays "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on a speaker, a small child darts away from his mother and runs giggling through the turtles.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh! No, no, no, no!" a volunteer cries, and the embarrassed parent reclaims her son.



A volunteer at Poipu Beach moves a cone into place to encroach visitors.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

The turtles snooze through the drama, seemingly accustomed to the hubbub their presence now elicits on Poipu Beach every single night. And yet, until two years ago, sea turtles rarely came ashore on this beach.

Rampant overfishing reduced the population significantly in the mid-1900s; the few turtles left shied away from humans and the beaches they frequented most. But the population has slowly rebounded after environmental protections were enacted in the 1970s. In the 1990s, turtles began coming ashore to rest on beaches across the Hawaiian Islands, including some often frequented by people, such as Oahu's Laniakea.

Two years ago, around when the pandemic led to the closure of many beaches, turtles began coming ashore here at Poipu Beach, one of the most visited beaches on Kauai. The phenomenon hasn't stopped since restrictions were lifted, leading to the nightly ballet between eager tourists and volunteer protectors, who keep a watchful eye over as many as 100 turtles a night, the first time anyone can remember a time when turtles have arrived in these numbers, e beach. ✕

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Hawaiian green sea turtles tend to bask in groups, suggesting the behavior may be social in some way.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

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How to manage such a spectacular event is anything but clear, and people are pretty much losing their minds over it.

“We haven’t had to navigate this before,” says Debbie Herrera, volunteer and education coordinator of Malama i na honu, the nonprofit group that organizes volunteer turtle protectors to watch over beaches on Oahu and Kauai. “Everyone is learning as we go.”

How the basking sea turtles started

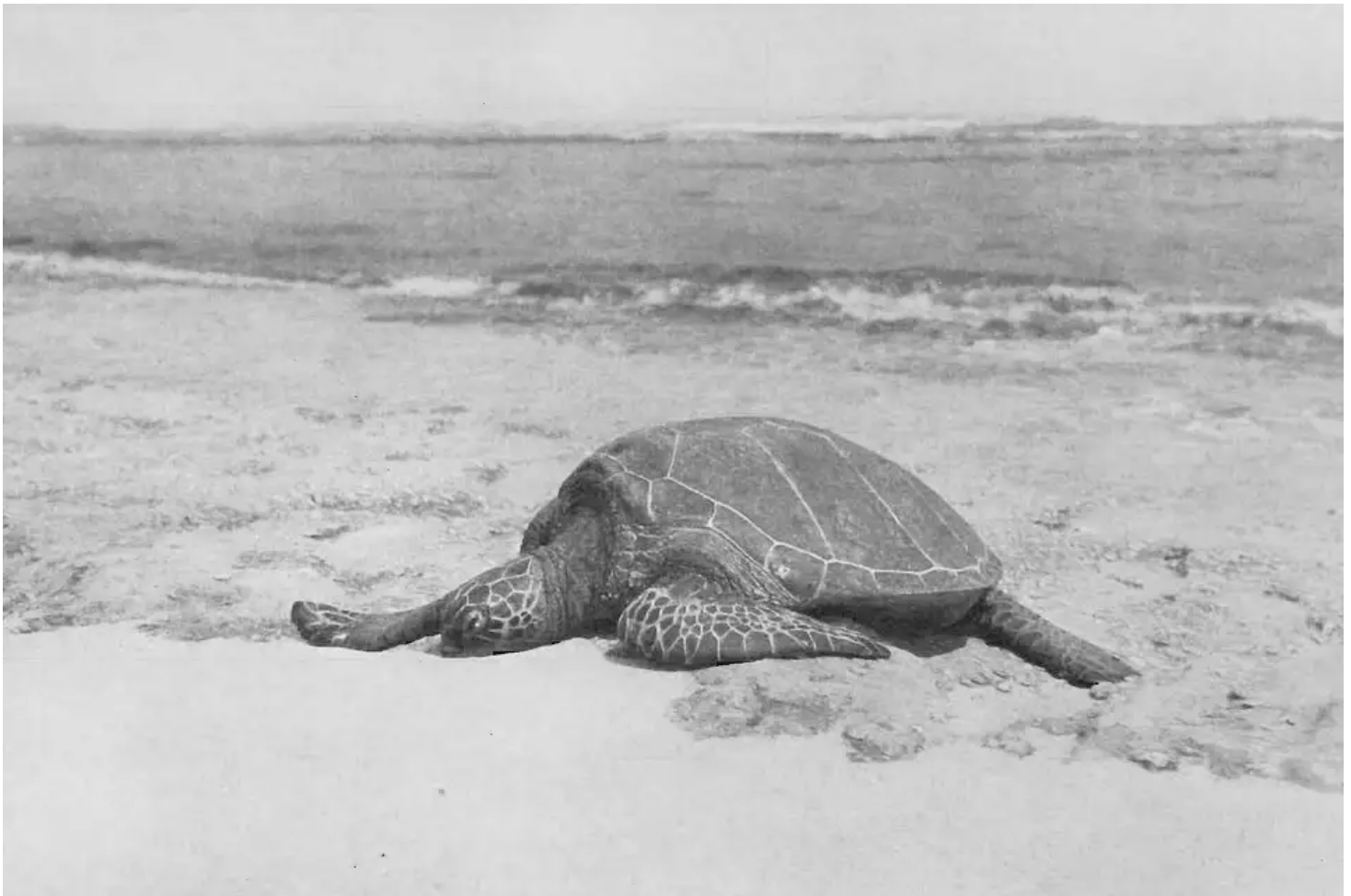
The first published photo of a Hawaiian green turtle basking on a beach appeared in National Geographic Magazine in 1925. The caption read: “These grotesque creatures browse in submarine fields of algae until hunger is satisfied, and then crawl heavily out to sprawl in the sand, safe from enemies in the sea.”

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“These grotesque creatures browse in submarine fields of algae until hunger is satisfied, and then crawl in the sand safe from enemies of the sea. On one occasion, the author, while walking 300 yards along the beach on Lisianski Island, counted 80 of these creatures from fifteen inches to four feet in length. Others, feeding a few yards offshore, were hidden by ripples in the water and so escaped this casual census. Their only enemies seem to be sharks.” Lisianski Island, 1925

Photo by Alexander Wetmore/Courtesy of George Balazs

Basking behavior among sea turtles is not fully understood, but that explanation is a pretty decent one, says sea turtle scientist George Balazs, who worked at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for almost half a century.

When Balazs began studying Hawaiian sea turtles in the early '70s, he traveled to where the Nat Geo photo was taken, the French Frigate Shoals, which are on the northwestern side of the Hawaiian Islands, about 100 miles from Kauai, and this is where Hawaiian monk seals lay their eggs. Although the turtles could often be seen at these nesting grounds, no records existed of them before Balazs began his work.



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Through his research, he discovered that turtles were being overharvested by commercial fishermen. They were understandably afraid of humans, Balazs told me, and didn't dare swim ashore on Hawaii's inhabited islands. An ensnared 100-pound turtle fetched about \$100 in the '70s, he said, and the meat often landed in fancy restaurant dishes across the islands.

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A Hawaiian green sea turtle glides through the water near the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, where basking behavior has been observed for many years.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

Sea turtles had long been sacred to Native Hawaiians. When Balazs' research showed a dramatic population decline — he documented a mere 67 sea turtles returning to their nesting grounds in 1973 — people rallied around the cause. In 1975, the state government banned the commercial harvest of sea turtles in Hawaii, and in 1978, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA listed the Hawaiian green sea turtle as threatened, triggering protections against harassment, including the 10-foot rule. Their numbers began to recover rapidly, with an increase of about 5% per year, according to Balazs.

"The speed that the numbers recovered after was shocking to me," Balazs told me.

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Over time, the turtles seemed to lose their fear of humans. In the 1990s, something magnificent began to happen: The sea turtles started crawling out of the sea and resting on inhabited island beaches across Hawaii. One in particular — Oahu's Laniakea Beach — got famous for it.

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How Hawaiian turtle

tourist attraction

In March of 1999, a solitary green turtle began the vanilla-colored sands of Laniakea. The loc

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Herrera, the volunteer coordinator, distinctly remembers visiting the North Shore with her kids around that time and seeing Brutus. There weren't many visitors at Laniakea Beach back then, she says, just some surfers and fishers. Although she had been living on the island for a couple of years, she had never seen a turtle crawl out of the water and onto the sand.



Hawaiian green sea turtles snooze on Kauai's Poipu Beach.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE


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"I called the Humane Society and I said, 'There's a turtle that I think is dead on the beach,'" Herrera says.

She was a schoolteacher then, with no background in marine science or turtle biology. She was aware that sea turtles came ashore to lay eggs on beaches, but like most people, she had no idea that they sometimes bask on land.

Of the seven species of sea turtles, only green turtles emerge from the water to bask. The phenomenon has been documented in just four places: the Galapagos, Socorro Island, Australia's Wellesley Islands and the Hawaiian archipelago. After Brutus hauled out at Laniakea, more turtles followed. By 2005, 16 resident turtles were showing up regularly to bask. People also began to arrive in greater numbers, until tour buses were bringing hundreds of visitors a day. Some started calling Laniakea "Turtle Beach" . Some of those visitors would move in closer to even sitting on them.

Those interactions led Balazs, then the head c
to spearhead the "Show Turtles Aloha" camp

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the turtles and minimize negative impacts on the animals. That work eventually turned into the nonprofit Malama i na honu, whose volunteers have been working daytime shifts and collecting data on Laniakea's turtles since 2007, tracking anywhere from 500 to 1,200 instances of turtles basking on the beach per year.

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Visitors to Poipu Beach drink cocktails while turtle watching.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

Tourists coming to see the turtles on Laniakea have created significant conflict, including gridlock from people parking illegally, which infuriated locals call “turtle traffic.” At least one crash has occurred, involving a 10-year-old pedestrian on an increasingly busy thoroughfare.

In 2021, when turtles began turning up on Poipu Beach, the Kauai community reached out to Malama i na honu to ask if the nonprofit could establish a volunteer program on Poipu Beach. But Herrera — who started volunteering and has served as volunteer and education coordinator with her hands full at Laniakea. Her first response, :

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Still, she flew over to Kauai to assess the situation and the numbers of turtles that were crawling out of t

night. She knew something had to be done.

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“Like you and everyone else,” she told me, “I was flabbergasted.”

The problems with Poipu

On Poipu Beach, the sun has set behind the Pacific. But hundreds of visitors still linger, snapping photos and swimming in the ocean right where the turtles are waiting for a chance to come ashore.



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A volunteer with Malama i na honu sets up a cone to prevent visitors at Poipu Beach from getting too close to basking, threatened sea turtles.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

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A volunteer in a cowgirl hat picks up her skirt and wades into the water. "At low tide, this is the hallway to their bedroom," the volunteer explains to the swimmers. "Can we open up the door so they can come in and sleep?"

The swimmers comply, perhaps because they've been asked so nicely. That's always the goal, Herrera tells me: not just to redirect people who are interfering with the turtles' behavior, but to do it in a friendly, approachable way.

That isn't always easy; volunteers have dealt with turtles being chased, straddled and scared off more times than they can count. It hasn't helped that people have continuously posted photos and videos on social media, Herrera told me, which has led to the event growing ever more popular.

The crowds have created a trash problem, left bathrooms in unsanitary conditions and eroded a nearby bluff, Herrera added. And in truth, the volunteers don't have very much authority. People are allowed to swim at Poipu Beach. People are allowed to fish. Although technically the volunteers could report visitors who refuse to remain 10 feet away from the turtles, that's not the purpose of the program.

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Visitors to Poipu Beach enjoy the water and sand as Hawaiian green turtles drift in to bask for the

Ashley Harrell/SEGATE

visitors at night, giving

indication from that

county did not answer

There is some evidence, though, that community leaders are starting to shift how they think about Poipu Beach. For instance, the Poipu Beach Foundation recently canceled its New Year's fireworks show to avoid harassing the turtles, according to Sue Kanoho, executive director of Kauai Visitors Bureau.

There's also an unspoken rule in Kauai that businesses will not promote the turtles as a tourist attraction, Kanoho told me, emphasizing the need to protect the wildlife. To that end, the bureau is planning a wildlife summit in January to ensure that Kauai's tourism professionals are clear on the rules around endangered species.

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One of the signs on Kauai's Poipu Beach reminds visitors of the rules around threatened Hawaiian green sea turtles.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

In the meantime, the volunteers of Malama i na honu will continue monitoring Poipu Beach each night, making gentle suggestions that people move back, adjusting safety cones as necessary, and teaching people how to take nighttime iPhone photos without using any flash. They will answer questions it takes, until visitors leave the beach for the r

Inevitably, more people will come. And with that Poipu, and all the other beaches where to accommodate both.

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"It's about co-existing," Herrera says. "I love the idea of people coming down and seeing it, because it's amazing. It's phenomenal. It's beautiful. It's all of those things. But when they walk away, I want to see it continue."

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Ashley Harrell is an associate editor covering California's parks for SFGATE.

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