

Environment

George Balazs: Sea Turtle Conservation Hinges On Cultural Awareness

The retired biologist says he never thought he would live long enough to see the once endangered species make such a strong recovery.



By Grace Cajski  / About 21 hours ago

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It was a trip to Maui roughly 50 years ago that changed everything for George Balazs.

He had been working toward his master's degree in tropical agriculture from the University of Hawaii Manoa with the goal of becoming a pig farmer. During a summer break, he decided to sail to Lahaina with his wife.

That's where they saw a pickup truck loaded with beautiful, 600-pound sea turtles, still alive and struggling. They were destined to be served as soup in touristy restaurants.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was exceptionally rare to see a sea turtle in the wild. The population was dwindling. The primary cause was

commercial harvesting, but disease exacerbated the issue.

From that moment on, Balazs forgot about pigs and dedicated himself to sea turtle science and conservation.



George Balazs, seen here around 2008 releasing a satellite-tagged juvenile loggerhead off the coast of Japan, has dedicated his life's work to sea turtle conservation. (Courtesy: George Balazs)

Over the next 45 years, his research, public speaking and expertise on sea turtle populations, first at UH and then at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service, drove state and nationwide action.

Now, at 80, Balazs is celebrating the remarkable success of the Hawaii sea turtle conservation movement.

"I never believed I would live long enough to see a restoration of the Hawaiian green turtle population," he said.

Balazs is humble, and insists this was not a one-man show. He credits other scientists, like the [late Dr. Archie Carr at the University of Florida](#), and the

general public.

“Our campaign was very successful. The people themselves said, ‘Yeah, let’s lay off the sea turtles.’ There was goodwill and buy-in from the people of Hawaii,” he said.

Still, colleagues consider him a crucial leader and pioneer in the turtle conservation world.

“He has mentored, guided and championed literally thousands of students to work with sea turtles and his efforts have played a major role in developing sea turtle and conservation scientists throughout the world,” said Marc Rice, co-director of Hawaii Preparatory Academy’s [Sea Turtle Research Program](#).

“He was the first sea turtle biologist to recognize the plight of Hawaii’s honu and championed the protection of our turtles from over-exploitation beginning back in the early 1970s,” he said.



George Balazs realized sea turtles were over-exploited during a research trip in 1973 on Tern Island in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. He's seen here three years later at nearby East Island in French Frigate Shoals. (Courtesy: George Balazs)

Balazs remembers the exact moment when he began to realize the over-exploitation of sea turtles. It was noon on a June day in 1973, just moments after landing a small DC-3 propeller plane on what was then the runway of Tern Island in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

“With some volunteer helpers, I embarked on a summer of keeping track of how many turtles were nesting on the little island,” he said.

Tern was considered a primary nesting place for sea turtles, but he remembers they saw just 67 turtles over the whole summer. He returned summer after summer, and the results were frightening.

He shared his findings with the state. In April 1974, the Board of Land and Natural Resources adopted Regulation 36, which banned all commercial take of sea turtles.

But state residents could still receive permits to take sea turtles for home consumption. This stipulation was critical, since turtles were a Native Hawaiian food source and used for ceremony.

“If you think the uniqueness of our Hawaiian culture is of some value to the state, then you must be willing to allow it to occur,” wrote Bill Puleloa, a friend of Balazs’ and aquatic biologist, in a 1998 op-ed in the Honolulu Advertiser.

The regulation worked. After five or six years, Balazs said, he started to notice a quantifiable increase in the population.

Yet the national sentiment, driven especially by concerns for the green sea turtles in Florida, was that the turtles should be listed under the Endangered Species Act. With honu under federal jurisdiction, subsistence harvesting would become illegal.



Sea turtles were released from a nest at Sandy Beach on Oahu last October. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2023)

“I started thinking, ‘Wait a minute, maybe this is too much federal overreach,’” he said. “So I wrote an official letter.”

The letter celebrates the state’s commitment to

understanding “this native species for the purposes of protection and perpetuation” and requests that the state “retain jurisdiction over its green turtles.”

But the sea turtles were added to the endangered species list in 1978.

“Researchers can take green turtles, but people of Hawaiian ancestry can’t. There’s got to be something wrong with that,” said Balazs.

As time passed, both after Regulation 36 and the 1978 ESA listing, the sea turtle population increased.

“We’re kind of a leader in the world of how green turtles can rebound if you take the main hunting pressure off of them, which was, in my mind and everybody’s, the commercial take for the restaurants,” said Balazs. “The turtles were here, there and everywhere.”

They had recovered so much that Balazs expected them to be delisted in 2015.

The [National Marine Fisheries Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the green turtles as “threatened” in their 2015 review](#), citing,

according to Balazs, threats associated with climate change.

In response, Balazs wrote an op-ed that year for the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that described the green sea turtle as “genetically, geographically, and ecologically bonded to Hawaii.”

“The turtle, like the Hawaiian culture itself, has flourished and expanded beyond all expectation,” he said. “The time has now come to return stewardship of the honu home to Hawaii, where it rightfully belongs.”

He continues to advocate for subsistence harvest and state-led conservation.

In the conclusion of a 2017 scientific paper, he wrote, “A new era should be initiated that encompasses cultural integration by and for the indigenous Hawaiian people that are themselves linked for millennia to their green turtles. Exactly how this will take place should be left to Hawaiians to decide.”

This cultural awareness is celebrated by his colleagues.

“He works closely with community members in his efforts to embrace the cultural aspects of sea turtle conservation,” said Laura Jim, a science teacher at Hawaii Preparatory Academy and co-director of its Sea Turtle Research Program.

Balazs has been retired since 2017, but he’s still an active member of the turtle conservation community.

He publishes papers, he watches turtle nests — an event that is now common, thanks to him and other conservation advocates. He doles out



George Balazs, seen here in November off Qoma Island in Fiji, continues to advocate for sea turtle conservation. (Courtesy: George Balazs)



Green sea turtles have become such a common sight on the North Shore of Oahu that they stop traffic. (Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2022)

advice,
encouraging
scientists to be
humble and
aware.

“When you
study turtles,
study the
culture. Talk to
and be friends
with the people
whose traditions
and knowledge

has been part of their life for millennia,” Balazs said. “Listen to local people. In any way you can, bring in the traditional knowledge.”

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