



Turtle Tagging at Punalu'u: SHORT ANSWERS TO MANY OF THE MOST COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING



Who are you?

Answer: Research biologists with the National Marine Fisheries Service of NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Government. Volunteer students from the University of Hawai'i's Marine Option Program and Hawai'i Preparatory Academy also work with us on a cooperative basis.

What are you doing?

Answer: Studying green sea turtles ("honu" in Hawaiian) to learn more about the biology and life history of these fascinating and somewhat mysterious marine animals. All sea turtles in Hawai'i and elsewhere in the United States are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

What will you do with the turtles?

Answer: Conduct thorough examinations for any injuries or disease, record body measurements and weight, apply small identification tags to the flippers (microchip PIT tags), and then let them go. Sometimes a small skin sample, stomach content sample, or blood sample will be collected for analysis.

Does it hurt them when they're tagged?

Answer: Yes, a little bit. However, many turtles show no response when tagged. The experience is probably similar to having your ear pierced. It is extremely important to tag turtles for research purposes so they can be individually recognized when captured in the future.

What can you learn from tagging?

Answer: How fast turtles grow, where they travel to, and (for adults) how often they breed.

Does it hurt when you lay them on their backs?

Answer: No, not at all. In fact, it's better to hold them this way for a short period of times. If we put them on their bellies they will struggle and possibly become stressed trying to crawl away.

How long can they safely stay out of the water?

Answer: For a very long time (many hours), provided they are kept cool. Sea turtles can't regulate their body temperature, so are susceptible to overheating if left for a long time in the direct sun.

Do turtles have to be kept wet when out of the water?

Answer: No, not at all. However, if it is a hot day with lots of sunshine and no available shade, keeping the turtle damp will promote cooling by evaporation when held for research. When turtles bask ashore, they decide for themselves when they want to return to the water.

How do you tell male from female?

Answer: The tail of the male turtle is much longer than the female's tail. However, lengthening of the male's tail only occurs when the turtle is very large and nearly a sexually mature adult (~150 lbs. or more). Both males and females weighing less than ~150 lbs. have the same size tails.

How old is the turtle and can you tell its age?

Answer: In Hawai'i, it takes an average of about 30 years or more for a green sea turtle to reach an adult size (150 lbs. or more). At present there's no reliable way to tell the exact age of a particular turtle. We can only give an estimate. Most of the turtles we catch are "youngsters".

How long do they live?

Answer: No one knows for sure how long sea turtles can live in the wild. However, if they take 30 years to mature, it's likely they live for many decades more. That is, unless they are illegally speared, drowned in a gillnet, hit by a speeding boat, or eaten by a large shark.

What do they eat?

Answer: Seaweed. Green sea turtles are the gentle vegetarians of the ocean. Seaweed in Hawai'i is called "limu".

Are sea turtles dangerous to swimmers?

Answer: Absolutely not. But swimmers can frighten the turtles if they constantly chase or bother the turtles in other ways.

Where do green sea turtles lay their eggs in Hawai'i?

Answer: At a special place called Lalo (French Frigate Shoals), an isolated reef with several small, uninhabited, sandy beaches located about 500 miles to the northwest of Honolulu. Lalo is a part of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service
Pacific Islands Fishery Science Center
Please see www.turtles.org

Sea Turtles in Trouble?
Stranded Ashore, Sick, or Injured?
Please call: **Hawai'i Statewide Reporting Hotline (888) 256-9840,**
or in East Hawai'i (808) 286-4359