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By Jobeth Devera

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(Image: Jason Oka)



(Image: Hawaii News Now)



NOAA research biologist T. Todd Jones (Image: Hawaii News Now)

NANAKULI, OAHU (HawaiiNewsNow) - NOAA is apologizing to the public over how the carcasses of three sea turtles were handled.

Nuuanu resident Jason Oka was getting rid of cuttings at Waimanalo Gulch landfill on Monday when he spotted the turtles amid the garbage and snapped a photo.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration officials said the agency typically disposes of dead sea turtles at the landfill. But officials said the turtles should have been covered with dirt or cloth.

Staffing issues at the landfill meant that wasn't possible Monday.

Debbie Herrera, volunteer education coordinator with Malama na Honu, which seeks to protect the endangered Hawaiian green sea turtle, said she was surprised to hear that the standard protocol is to dispose of sea turtles at the dump.

"They're really respected so this is surprising, very surprising. That is absolutely opposite of everything I have ever been told," she said, adding that the improper disposal Monday was an honest mistake.

On Tuesday, NOAA took full responsibility.

"In this case, due to under-staffing, regrettably the turtles were not covered over with soil," said NOAA research biologist T. Todd Jones. "The perception is that the animals were left and they weren't cared for and that's what we apologize for."

NOAA officials in Hawaii handle 150 to 200 dead sea turtles annually. The turtles die naturally or from illnesses. Some are euthanized because of disease.

Jones said NOAA used to incinerate dead sea turtles, but the incinerator is no longer operational and sea turtles can't simply be placed back in the sea after they die because they might have harmful chemicals in their bodies or could attract predators.

Dumping sea turtles at the landfill is currently the only option the agency has for disposing of the animals, NOAA says, but officials have been looking for alternatives and hope to work with other federal partners and cultural practitioners to seek a solution.

"We're open to alternatives as to what could be future possibilities for dealing with the animals," Jones said.

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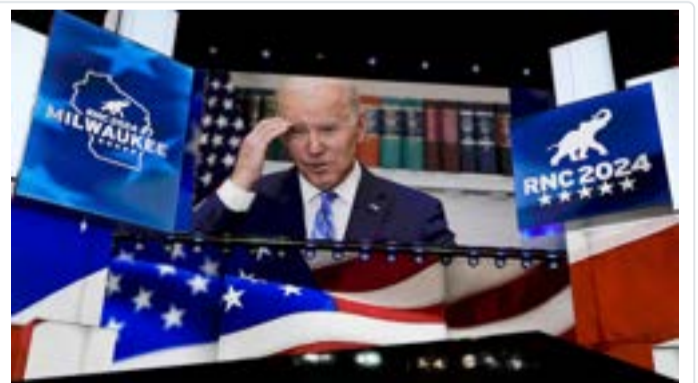
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