



The turtles should be smiling, too! Mauna Lani Resort's Daniel Akaka, Jr., and Marty Wisner get sea turtles ready for Independence Day release.

## Public is Invited to Help the Turtles Celebrate Independence Day

BY ALANA VILLANUEVA

**T**his 4th of July, as hundreds of turtle-lovers and well-wishers alike gather on the beach at the Mauna Lani Resort, the term "Independence Day" holds special meaning. Celebrating the resort's eleventh annual Turtle Independence Day, a handful of excited youngsters in the eight-year-old range will escort 8 to 10 young green sea turtles, with something like regal pomp, back into warm Hawaiian waters.

The annual event, often studied with celebs and captured by television crews from around the state, began in 1990 as a joint effort between Sea Life Park Hawai'i on O'ahu and the Mauna Lani resort to help insure the continued survival of the endangered species. Marty Wisner, staff biologist at Mauna Lani since 1985, remembers exactly how Turtle Independence Day got its start. "I got a call one day from the hotel regard-

ing the fish ponds there — they were filled with so much algae that they actually had two guys assigned to pick it out everyday. So I suggested that some turtles be put into one of the ponds, and within a month the encroaching algae was substantially reduced. After that, the deal to house and raise young turtles here was worked out with Sea Life Park, and in the last ten years we've released 105 and haven't had to vacuum the ponds once."

The turtles, tagged, measured and weighed before release, generally do quite well after release, if left alone by humans, Wisner says. "Most of them, the first couple of years, hang out in front of the hotel here, then after a couple of years move up towards Mauna Kea, or down towards Waikoloa. Some of them range even as far south as Honaunau."

Even the sea turtles often seen basking

on the protected beach at Pu'uhonua o Honaunau are very likely some of Mauna Lani's previously released turtles, contends Wisner. Called "honu" and beloved as a powerful 'aumakua' by the native Hawaiians, the green sea turtle has in the last century come under vigorous protection by state and federal agencies, and is specifically protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973. The vigilant efforts to protect this vital member of Hawaii's ancient heritage, led by the National Marine Fisheries Service, are sometimes undermined by well-meaning and unwitting humans. "We have a young turtle that was released here in 1994, for example, which we refer to as Problem Number Three" relates Wisner, "Problem Number Three became a problem because people have been feeding it for the past year, out in the ocean, and it's now taken to hanging out close to shore, begging for food. Unfortunately, if you don't have food, but are wearing maybe a green swimsuit or trunks, it's not unusual to receive a nip. That's why it's Problem Number Three," explains Wisner.

While these types of situations are rare, and almost never happen without human encouragement, it's important to remember that the turtles are a wild species, and protected by state and federal law. "It's not a good idea to feed a wild animal," Wisner points out. That's why as of January 1, 2000, the grounds out in front of the hotel became a preserve. "There's no tropical fish collecting and no feeding the turtles now. It's still legal to pull fish and throw-net in front of the hotel, though"

Despite the occasional problem situations that arise from turtle-human interactions, the turtles at the Mauna Lani preserve serve a very important function, possibly the most important of all for any species sharing the planet with

such an expansive and pervasive species as our own. "The important thing to know about the turtle release program is that the goal isn't really species restoration, it isn't what is termed a "head-start" program. The main reason is really for the turtles to act as little ambassadors for their own species."

Commenting on interactive tours held on the hotel's grounds, such as the Fish Feeding Tour attended by local schoolchildren every Wednesday and Friday, he observes, "We're teaching a whole generation of children about Hawaii's indigenous green sea turtle. They're being educated without realizing it."

The turtles, each approximately 3 to 5 years old and weighing about 20 pounds, are shipped in from all over to be released on the auspicious day. Some come from zoos as far away as Oklahoma and Minnesota. This year, a total of ten turtles, including two from Minnesota and one from a large Midwestern zoo, are scheduled for release.

The day will begin with a 10K Turtle Run held at 7 a.m. for adults and keikis alike, followed by the commencement of turtle activities such as face-painting and other educational displays, all sponsored by Sea Life Park and beginning at around 9 a.m. At 9:45, the turtles are gathered from the turtle ponds, and the procession leading to the 10 a.m. release begins to form. The turtles are then carried down to the beach in stretchers by a group of eight-year-old children, usually hotel guests. Finally, upon reaching the destination point on the beach, the adult "dignitaries" then pick up the turtles, place them in the water, and watch as they swim out into their natural home. Wisner observes, "It only lasts about five to ten minutes, but those are the moments that everyone here waits all year for." 🐢



# HONU QUIZ

*Test Your Knowledge of the Green Sea Turtle  
(Answers on page 15.)*

**G**reen sea turtles are reptiles whose ancestors evolved on land and returned to the sea to live about 150 million years ago. They are one of the few species so ancient that they watched the dinosaurs evolve and become extinct. As reptiles, green sea turtles, like all other species of sea turtles, are cold-blooded, meaning that they get their body heat from the environment rather than making their own. They breathe air and their skin has scales.

- 1.** In addition to these reptilian traits, all species of turtles have evolved a bony outer shell that is considered the most highly developed protective armor of any vertebrate species to have ever lived. It protects them from predators, as turtles are not known for their speed. Sea turtles are different from land turtles in two aspects. Do you know what they are?
- 2.** Can sea turtles breathe under water?
- 3.** Some people have observed turtles "crying." Why do they shed tears?
- 4.** There are seven species of sea turtles. Four of them live in Hawaiian waters. Can you name them?
- 5.** How do green sea turtles get their name?
- 6.** How can you tell the males from the females?
- 7.** Because of their efficient mobility in the water and their size, adult green sea turtles have only two known predators. What are they?