

A2 NEWS

Some prodigal turtles return home again

OCEAN WATCH



SUSAN SCOTT

A few weeks ago, I wrote about a small turtle that nudged a woman's leg while she waded off the Big Island's Mauna Lani Resort. The turtle swam away but returned several times throughout the day, gliding fearlessly among people's legs in the shallow water. The woman's husband wrote, "Had someone once or more fed this turtle and thus conditioned his friendliness?"

own best advocates for conservation.

And so, in 1989 the "Hawaiian Sea Turtle Ambassador Program" was born.

Facilities meeting strict criteria were lent one or more hatchlings to keep until they outgrew their display tanks. Then, after being certified healthy, they would be released in Hawaiian waters.

This program of public awareness and education about sea turtles has been popular and successful. Sea Life Park's little ambassadors have traveled near and far representing their species. When it was time to come home, most were released on the 4th of July in a Turtle Independence Day celebration at the Mauna Lani Resort.

I didn't know the answer to this question until turtle biologist George Balazs sent me a paper he presented at last year's symposium on sea turtle biology and conservation. The manuscript told the story of the Mauna Lani turtle.

In the 1960s, before it was against the law to take turtles from the wild, Sea Life Park workers collected several greens for display. The turtles got a large swimming pool, a white sand beach and plenty of nourishing food.

Apparently the park turtles liked the resort life (and each other) because in 1976 some nested on their private beach and produced hatchlings. Since then, nesting has been an annual event there. After the eggs hatch, the offspring are released in the ocean.

I was invited to go on such a turtle-liberating excursion once, and it remains one of my fondest memories. Watching the youngsters paddle away into the great unknown, however, was bittersweet. Researchers believe that of a nest of 100 or so hatchlings, only a few make it to adulthood.

After years of raising baby turtles, Sea Life Park worker Steve Kaiser had an idea. Why not loan a few hatchlings each year to aquariums in Canada and the United States? The charming turtles would be their

OCCASIONALLY THIS turtle-lending has been mislabeled as a head-start program designed to give hatchling turtles better chances of survival. This was never the goal of the loan program; however, through flipper and PIT (injected) tags, researchers have been able to track the ambassadors' progress.

From 1990 to 1999, 102 captive-reared green turtles were released at the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel. In that time, 18 have been seen again, 12 swimming and six stranded. Of the six stranded turtles, two were dead, three were emaciated, and one had a severe propeller injury. Veterinarians treated the four sick turtles and released them again.

Of the 11 swimming turtles weighed, all were the normal size for foraging turtles of that age. This implies that at least 11 homegrown turtles made the adjustment to natural living.

But not so. Three of these turtles hang around the Mauna Lani area to this day eating lettuce and fish pellets offered by well-meaning people. One of these freeloaders is most certainly my reader's little leg-nudger.

These three turtles didn't adjust well to the wild, but they're still a success. In learning how to live with people, their jobs as ambassadors for their species will likely last a lifetime.

Susan Scott can be reached by e-mail at
susanscott@hawaii.rr.com