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MĀLAMALAMA

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Hilo students rescue endangered turtle

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George Balazs, NOAA Pacific
Islands Fisheries Science Center

Students enrolled in the University of Hawai'i at Hilo's [marine science](#) summer program had an unexpected hands-on lesson when their field trip to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Marine Turtle Research Program turned into a honu rescue.

UH Hilo Professors Jason and Jennifer Turner and two staff members were evaluating the health of Hawaiian green sea turtles with NOAA's George Balazs when a report came in about a turtle stuck in a freshwater pond at the site of the old Punalu'u Village Restaurant on the Big Island of Hawai'.

Jason Turner got a hand on one flipper in the murky water, and scientists and students together hauled the turtle to a scale. At 309 pounds, it was one of the largest female hawksbill turtles on record. The honu'ea, as the hawksbills are known in Hawaiian, are endangered, with just over 100 nesting females.

For Balazs, a world-renowned sea turtle expert, the episode had a touch of déjà vu. Just over 11 years before, he had saved another female hawksbill from the same pond with the help of UH Hilo Professor Leon Hallacher and a group of university [Marine Option Program](#) students.

- 📺 **Web extra:** [Watch the turtle rescue](#)

“George was telling us the story of that hawksbill as we were setting up, but we had no idea that history was about to repeat itself,” says Jennifer Turner.

The scientists believe the turtle is one of an estimated 12 percent of hawksbill females that utilize multiple beaches. She was seen nesting a few days earlier at Kamehame, where she was first tagged in 2005, and she was spotted there and at Halape in 2007.



The crowd bids farewell to the hawksbill sea turtle as it crawls into the ocean.

Balazs believes she may have entered the pond during the March tsunami, or she may have crawled into the pond after attempting to nest on Punalu‘u Beach earlier in the summer.

The animal was examined for injuries, measured, tagged, and then released into the ocean at the Big Island’s famed Punalu‘u Black Sand Beach as visitors and beach-goers looked on and erupted into applause.

“Awesome,” exclaimed one student. “I’m seriously thinking of transferring here.”

Photos, video and reporting by Kenneth Hupp, University of Hawai‘i at Hilo public information officer.

Video clip of Big Island turtle rescue

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