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Tokelau turtle hatchlings leave their young carers for big blue Pacific Ocean voyage

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In Tokelau, school kids have been rushing home for their favourite activity of the day: turtle time (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/543365/tokelau-s-young-turtle-carers>).

Five-year-old Ilisapesi Sakalia (Pesi) loved her sea turtle friends, "Popo" and "Uto".

'Popo' means husked coconut, and 'Uto' means a coconut sprout.

"It's teaching them to look after what we have in our environment," Pesi's grandmother Asi Pasilio, Tokelau's Natural Resources and Environment department director, told RNZ Pacific.

Turtles "Popo" and "Uto" - two of the more than 30 sea turtles found in Tokelau in 2025. Photo: Supplied/ Elena Pasilio

They are two of the more than 30 sea turtles found near their atoll Nukunonu late last year, and taken in by local families so they would not get eaten by sharks.

"They were very small, like babies of a few days, and they they were much bigger - double, triple in size - when they left," Asi said.

The family would have liked to look after the hatchlings for around a year, so that they could have grown big and strong before being released back into the wild Pacific Ocean.



Pesi's cousin 9-year-old Tehoa Lui with Turtle 'Popo' going for their daily swim in Tokelau. Photo: Supplied/ NZ Geographic

'They just took off'

While New Zealand Geographic scientists were in Tokelau assessing coral reef bleaching (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/557865/tokelau-s-coral-reefs-show-signs-of-recovery>), they filmed the turtles after seeing RNZ's previous story.

Both Pesi and her mum were far away in Auckland at the time and Uto, the bigger one, swam away.

Popo has since made a dash during the daily ocean swim and water change, which five-year-old Pesi had been the boss of.

"That's very sad. They have gone. Oh, man, it was very sad," Asi said.

"They just took off."

"Now I just try and think positive about it. They are not so small and weak. They are now older and bigger, so I'm sure they can look after themselves out there," Asi said.

Pesi's mum does not know how to tell her five-year-old that both of her friends have started their ocean voyage earlier than expected.

Mum Elena, who is Nukunonu's environment officer and a trained journalist, says the lessons all the young turtle carers have learnt are invaluable.

"Seeing these kids nurture sea creatures and the earth gives me hope for the future," Elena said.

Pesi's grandmother Asi is staying positive saying they had grown a lot and hopes they are strong and fast enough to avoid natural predators, which is why they take them in in the first place.

She has a message for the hatchlings.

"I would tell them, look after yourself out there. It's full of predators, and there are harmful and harmless creatures. Just take care of yourself out there," she said.

Sonic, turtle in the care of young Filomena Fatia and Paulina Fatia. Photo: Supplied/ Elena Pasilio



Ilissapesi Sakalia holding her turtles "Popo" and "Uto" - two of the more than 30 sea turtles found in Tokelau in 2025. Photo: Supplied/ Elena Pasilio



Sonic and Shadow

It is not just Popo and Uto leaving early - one of the turtles Filomena Fatia and Paulina Fatia had in their care has also made a dash.

The pepes (young ones) who live on Nukunonu atoll have been taking care of Sonic and Shadow.

Their mum, Talei Pelenato, said the kids loved going swimming with them.

Mena said she looked forward to going swimming with Sonic and Shadow in the afternoons when she and her dad changed their water.

In just four months, they have grown so strong that Shadow made an early dash into the blue Pacific waters.

Their parents are proud of their conservation work at such a young age.

Sonic, turtle in the care of young Filomena Fatia and Paulina Fatia. Photo: Supplied/ Elena Pasilio



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