

# Te Ipukarea Society: Snap and track- A photo friendly way to follow turtles

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GROW Aitutaki youth practice their turtle tracking skills through the user-friendly method of taking photos to record and match unique prints on turtles' face. TIS/25060601

## To help protect the ocean and its marine life, Te Ipukarea Society (TIS) recently teamed up with GROW Aitutaki to teach local youth about marine conservation through a turtle tracking project.

GROW Aitutaki stands for “Generating Relevant Opportunities With Aitutaki”. It empowers youth through place-based learning, culture and inclusion. The aim is to raise tomorrow’s protectors of our land and lagoon.

The initiative took place on the King’s Birthday weekend, with a team from TIS, including renowned turtle expert George Balazs from Hawaii, visiting Aitutaki. While there they facilitated an engaging citizen science project aimed at monitoring and safeguarding turtles.

Seventeen young people from GROW Aitutaki took part in the training, which focused on learning how to track and monitor sea turtles. The youth learned how to identify individual turtles by taking photos of the unique marks on the left side of their faces. This will help researchers and community keep track of turtle movements and behaviour.

The day started with a presentation from TIS director Alanna Smith, who explained the different turtle species found in the Cook Islands, the different methods used to track turtle migrations, the threats which face turtles today, and why it is important to protect these marine animals. George Balazs also shared interesting facts about turtle behaviour and eating habits, helping the youth understand their vital role in the ocean.

This was followed by hands-on experience, giving the youth a chance to see marine life up close in the calm waters of Aitutaki Lagoon. For some students, this was their first time venturing out into the deep lagoon beyond the beaches close to home.

The opportunity helped everyone participating realise how human activities threaten marine animals, and how turtle tracking can provide key information to protect or better manage areas where populations are commonly found.

A facilitator from GROW Aitutaki said it is important for young people to connect with the environment to help them appreciate local biodiversity. This could then encourage upcoming local ecologist, biologist perhaps even future conservation leaders.



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The students said they really enjoyed the experience. Many shared that turtles have special meaning for them, linking them to their ancestors and inspiring them to become guardians of the ocean.

The team of students sighted about 10 turtles in the lagoon, although noticed the Aitutakian turtles were more 'shy and flighty' than some of the ones they see in Rarotonga. This made it difficult to get good ID photos of the left side of the face.

As part of their ongoing conservation efforts, the GROW Aitutaki youth will visit Rarotonga in July to take part in more activities focused on conservation efforts in both marine and terrestrial environments.

This project shows how important it is to involve young people in caring for the environment. By learning about and protecting marine animals like turtles, they can help ensure healthy oceans for future generations. Through education, hands-on experience, and community involvement, these initiatives and programmes play a significant role in inspiring a new wave of conservation advocates dedicated to safeguarding the environment and marine life that sustains us all.

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