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Sea Turtle Nests Threatened On North Shore By Lights, Bonfires, Joyrides

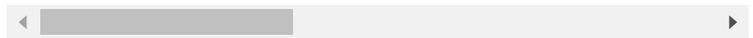
Illegal activities and failure to enforce laws are threatening honu nests at



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Ke Iki Beach on O'ahu.

By Leilani Combs / July 24, 2025

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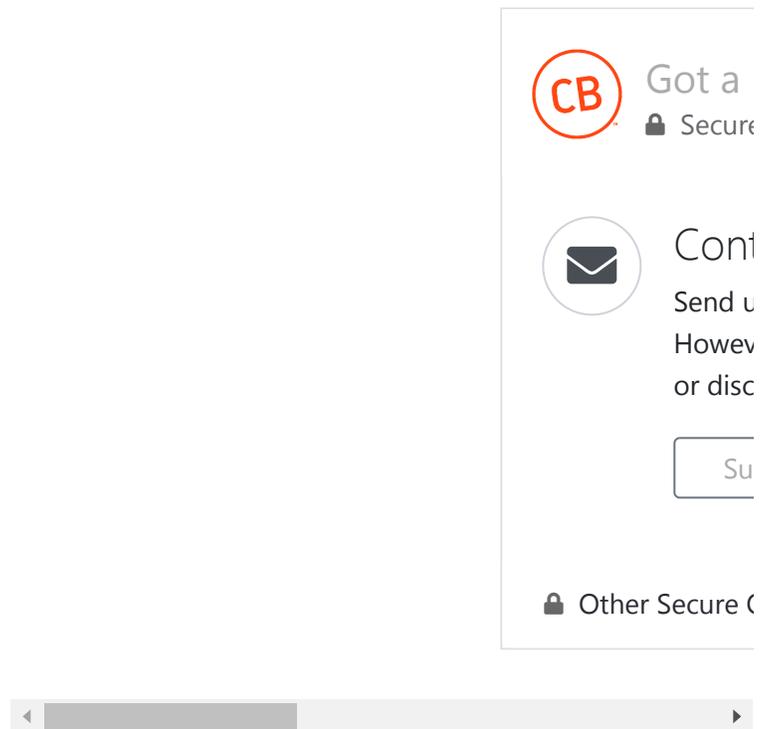
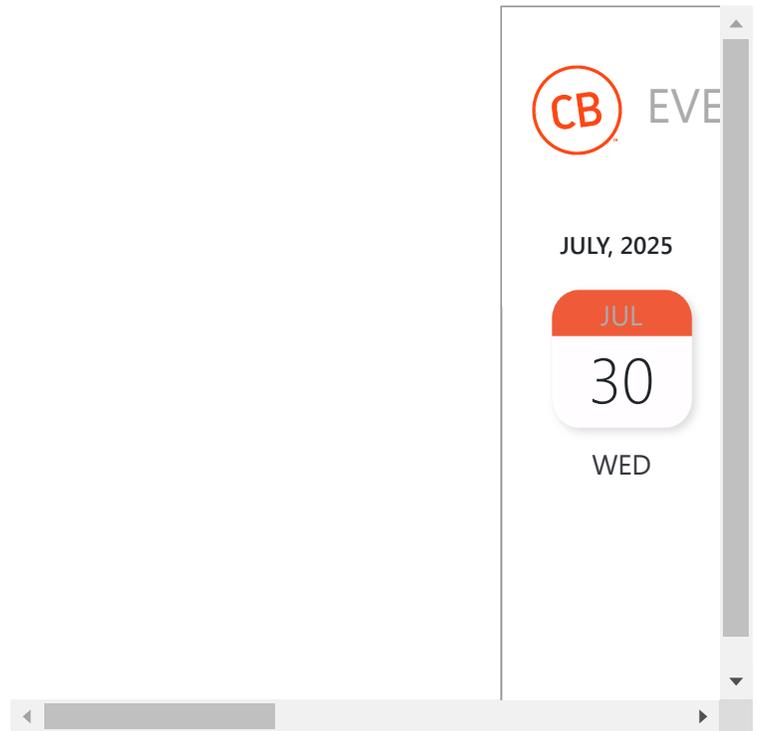
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Soon, hundreds of tiny honu — Hawai'i's iconic green sea turtles — will emerge from nests on beaches across O'ahu and make the long, harrowing journey across the sand to grow in the safety of the Pacific Ocean.

This summer at Ke Iki Beach, the hatchlings' journey has become increasingly dangerous.

The North Shore beach is riddled with hazards, including flood lights from beachside homes — many of them illegal rentals — open bonfires that burn late into the night, and locals who like to take their lifted 4x4 trucks for joyrides across the sand.

Meanwhile, the wildlife managers and nonprofit groups that aim to protect



these threatened marine animals are struggling to catch up.

Ke Iki only recently reemerged as a honu nesting site after years of inactivity, with at least one female coming ashore regularly in the past several years to dig her nests along the edge of the beach.



Beachgoers enjoy Ke Iki Beach, playing volleyball and walking their dogs near turtle nests. (Leilani Combs/Civil Beat/2025)

By simply building her nests in the same place she was born — as the turtles do — she unwittingly created a gauntlet for her offspring.

While nests have popped up here and there on this stretch of beach, Debbie Herrera, volunteer coordinator for the turtle conservation nonprofit [Mālama i na Honu](#), said that

this number of nests at Ke Iki is unprecedented.

Sheldon Plentovich, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Islands Coastal program coordinator, added that the situation this year has been especially daunting for her team.

"I have to be honest and say our team was really disappointed that this turtle has decided to nest at this beach again just because there's so many threats," she said.

Fish and Wildlife, alongside Mālama i na Honu, are trying to caution the public to be careful at Ke Iki. But it's not just a matter of education, it's also a matter of enforcement since all of the activities threatening the nests are already illegal.

A tangle of laws on the local, state and federal level overlap and, occasionally, stymie enforcement.

Driving on the beach falls under the jurisdiction of both the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement and the Honolulu Police Department. The same goes for open fires on the beach.

Enforcement to require that properties shield their lights so they don't shine directly at the beach could fall under the Department of Planning and Permitting or the state's conservation enforcement division. Direct protection of the turtles themselves could fall under Fish and Wildlife, the state, or even any individual who chooses to file a lawsuit under the Endangered Species Act.

The Ugly

Honu nesting season extends from April through the end of October, during which pregnant females of around 35 years or older return to the sites of their own births. They come ashore in the dark of

night to dig nests in the sand where they will lay 60 to 160 eggs.

They repeat the process every two weeks, so a single turtle leaves multiple nests on one beach.

From the time the eggs are laid it takes two months for the turtles to emerge as golf ball-sized hatchlings that use each other as ladders before setting out on the journey across the sand. It's unknown how many make it to the ocean but the odds of making it to adulthood are low: 1 in 1,000.

Of the manmade threats at Ke Iki, driving on the beach poses the greatest concern while the eggs are still buried in the sand. Honu build their nests in the soft, dry reaches of the upper beach so high tides won't destroy them, the very section favored by joyriders.

Plentovich said she's seen evidence — including tire tracks and videos provided by witnesses — of golf carts, all-terrain vehicles and even of

trucks having done donuts in the sand near the nests. That prompted Plentovich, aided by Mālama i na Honu, to plant stakes with bright orange ribbons and laminated warning signs.



Signs placed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife, with the help of Mālama i na Honu volunteers, warn people of turtle nest locations on Ke Iki Beach. (Leilani Combs/Civil Beat/2025)

When someone drives over a nest it compacts the sand covering the eggs. Plentovich said those eggs will still hatch, but then the babies are stuck in the compacted sand. Then, she said, “they just die kind of this slow, sad death in the ground.”

Driving is not legal on any Hawai‘i beaches without a special permit, such as those granted to lifeguards.

If the nests are spared by the illegal driving and the hatchlings emerge, the next major obstacle the baby turtles face at Ke Iki are lights shining late into the night.

In a world without human interference, the light of the moon and the stars reflecting off the water act as a beacon to guide the newly hatched turtles across the expanse of sand to the ocean. Lights from houses, streets, parks and so on act as a siren, drawing the young turtles mauka, or inland, away from the shorebreak.

When they get off track, the tiny reptiles cannot survive long without water and often die of dehydration.

The last time this female nested at Ke Iki Beach in 2021, one of her babies was found on the other side of the Banzai Skatepark, nearly half a mile from its nest.



Vehicle tracks cut between three honu nests recently on the North Shore of O'ahu. When someone drives over a nest it compacts the sand covering the eggs, trapping the hatchlings when they emerge. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2025)

Also in 2021, a group of people were having a bonfire on Ke Iki beach when they found themselves surrounded by baby sea turtles. Greg Gerstenberger, owner of the Ke Iki Beach Bungalows, remembers hearing about people scooping them up to get them into the water.

According to Plentovich, not all of the hatchlings escaped that fire.

Open bonfires outside of designated containers are illegal on O'ahu's beaches and carry a state penalty of [no more than \\$5,000](#) for first the offense, with an additional

\$1,000 per day that the behavior continues.

The Bad

Even though state and county officials already have laws on the books intended to address all the looming threats to turtle nests, that only matters if someone will enforce them.

People off-roading on the beach, for example, could either be hit with a fine of between \$25 and \$500 from the [Honolulu Police Department](#), or up to \$5,000 by the Department of Land and Natural Resources' conservation enforcement division. But turtle advocates say it's nearly impossible to get officers to issue those tickets if they didn't see the activity themselves.



Fireworks exploding out of a bonfire on Ke Iki Beach on

July 21. (Courtesy Mālama i
na Honu/2025)

Plentovich said that Mālama i
na Honu and other groups
regularly report driving
incidents and evidence of
beach driving to state
enforcement officers but
receive little to no response.
Just this past Monday, a
volunteer at Ke Iki beach
found people having a bonfire
not 50 yards from the turtle's
nests and reported it to those
state officers, but no one
responded.

The following night a
volunteer attempted to speak
with people having an open
bonfire in almost the same
location. They were throwing
fireworks into the fire.
According to Herrera, the
individuals were not interested
in their outreach. That incident
was also reported to DLNR,
but Herrera said that again no
officer responded.

The state's conservation
enforcement division did not
respond to Civil Beat's
requests for an interview
about its response efforts.

Instead, it emailed a statement reminding people that beach driving is prohibited and a risk to turtle nests. The Honolulu Police Department did not respond.

Light pollution, which poses the most widespread threat to these baby turtles, may also be the most challenging factor to stop.

A hodgepodge of laws aim at curbing light pollution and protecting Hawai'i's native seabirds, turtles and other wildlife. They attempt not only to stop light from spilling out onto the beach but also to limit its brightness. They also set light curfews for certain types of facilities like sports complexes.



Lights from a North Shore home that could disorient honu hatchlings when they emerge from their nests on Ke Iki Beach. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2025)

But on Ke Iki, light spills out from houses all along the beach late into the night. It illuminates pathways, pours out from windows and from guests outside enjoying late night barbeques. One recent evening, flood lights pointed directly at the beach only feet away from the turtle's nests.

Plentovich and Herrera have been trying to address the issue through public outreach. The nonprofit has nearly 100 volunteers who take shifts patrolling beaches known to have turtle nests. While they're patrolling, volunteers pick up trash and engage with beachgoers about conservation.

Plentovich and Herrera have also tried going door to door to drop off educational materials at the houses along Ke Iki to inform people about the danger light poses for baby turtles. They said that although most people seem receptive to the message, it can be hard to tell if they will actually follow through with keeping the lights off.

The hardest part of getting the message out, they said, is the sheer number of short-term vacation rentals along this stretch of beach. Plentovich said that they would have great conversations, “people would say that they’re happy to turn off the lights, but by the end of the week they’re gone and it starts all over again.”

They said that they have also tried having guests place their outreach materials inside the rentals for the next guests, only for them to be thrown away by those who clean the rental between guests.

Making things even more complicated, city records show that most of the vacation rentals near Ke Iki are operating illegally. The properties next to the nests have received notices of violations or notices of orders to cease operations, according to the short-term rental compliance map provided by Honolulu’s Department of Planning & Permitting.

They still show up on short-term rental sites such as Airbnb and VRBO.

Some local residents and legal rental operators like Gerstenberger said they would be willing to do what they could to help the turtles, including turning off outside lights at night and letting their guests know that the turtles and the nests are nearby. However, they remained unsure about how close the lights needed to be to the nests to have an effect on the turtles.

Even lights shining far away, Plentovich said, can easily lead the hatchlings astray.



The moon is the main light source newly hatched honu use to find the ocean, so bright lights from homes or Kamehameha Highway light can lead them astray. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2025)

The moon, she pointed out, is the main light source they rely on to get to the ocean — so unshielded lights in the distance can easily attract the tiny turtles, too, fatally diverting them off course.

“They’ll turn and end up walking miles,” she said, “We will find them being eaten alive by invasive ants.”

The most important protections for honu fall under the federal Endangered Species Act. The act prohibits the “take” of any threatened or endangered species, which federal officials define as any actions ranging from disturbing those animals to killing them.

That includes unintentional take through light attraction, according to David Henkin, an attorney with Earthjustice, an environmental law nonprofit.

“If someone’s not intending to do it, or they don’t even know that they’re doing it, they’re still liable, and there are still penalties,” Henkin said.

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Sheldon Plentovich, U.S. Fish
and Wildlife Service

Henkin warned that the owners of the vacation rentals are not off the hook for the actions of their tenants. It is still the property owners’ responsibility, he said, to ensure that their guests are following the law.

But someone needs to track them down. And that’s not all, according to Kristen Kelly, the marine species outreach and education coordinator with the state’s Division of Aquatic Resources.

Kelly said that rules around take can be hard to enforce. Someone, she said, would need to witness the hatchlings moving toward a specific light and document it to provide

evidence of which house, and person, was responsible for the take.

Henkin disagreed. “As long as your light’s contributing to the attraction,” he said, “you’re liable for causing take.”

And The Good

Plentovich tries to stay focused on finding solutions. She said she has been working with DLNR to address the things that they can, like urging its enforcement division to regularly patrol Ke Iki Beach to help prevent beach driving.

Fish and Wildlife, along with multiple state divisions, is working with Honolulu city officials to place barriers and signs where they know people are driving onto Ke Iki beach. However, Kelly said that will take time and is unlikely to be completed before the current eggs hatch.

In the meantime, the aquatic resources division has placed its laminated signs stating that the beach is a turtle nesting

site around beach entrances reminding visitors to stay 150 feet away from nesting turtles. The signs also discourage beach driving and light pollution.

To lessen light pollution, Plentovich said, homeowners and renters should only put lights where they are really needed. Lights for illuminating pathways should be placed low to the ground and all external lights should be shielded with light covers. She said that timers and movement sensors are a good way to make sure that lights are only on when needed. Additionally, she said, red- or amber-colored lights have less of an impact on wildlife behavior.



A Hawaiian green sea turtle blends in among the rocks in Shark's Cove off O'ahu's North Shore. (Leilani Combs/Civil Beat/2025)

Plentovich said that it is important to learn how to coexist with these animals. Honu were almost eradicated by commercial harvests through the 1900s, she said. However, according to the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association](#), aggressive protections and intergovernmental cooperation led to a conservation success, changing their designation from endangered to threatened.

The [majority of honu](#), 96%, nest in the Papahānaumokuākea National Monument on Lalo atoll, also known as French Frigate Shoals. But in the future, as they lose their nesting sites in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands to sea level rise, more likely will turn to nesting space on main island beaches.

“A lot of our behaviors and a lot of things that we in society do cause harm to listed species, particularly in Hawai‘i,” said Henkin, the Earthjustice attorney. “In those

cases, the law makes it illegal, and you need to do something about it.”

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