



Touching Trouble: Actress Faces Backlash Over Hawaii Wildlife Laws

Hawaii Travel News / March 3, 2025 / 34 Comments

Hawaii's beaches are home to the cherished [Hawaiian green sea turtle](#), or honu. Yet, a troubling pattern persists as visitors ignore guidelines and get too close, putting these animals at risk. Despite years of outreach, education, and enforcement, the problem continues, raising concerns among conservationists, and officials.



Four Hawaii parks have paid visitor reservations:
Diamond Head State Monument, Oahu.
Haena State Park, Kauai.
Waianapanapa State Park, Maui.
Iao Valley State Monument, Maui.

On a recent visit to Maui, actress China McClain (seen in the lead photo) sparked controversy after sharing a video on social media showing her touching a Hawaiian green sea turtle. The footage quickly drew backlash from residents and conservationists, who pointed out that approaching or handling these federally protected animals is harmful and against guidelines meant to ensure their safety.

While McClain later apologized, the incident reignited frustration over visitors disregarding Hawaii's wildlife protection rules, despite repeated efforts to educate the public on the challenges, and social media continues to fuel concerns about marine life.

^
The growing issue of tourist interactions.

In traditional Hawaiian stories, honu are navigators who helped guide early Polynesian voyagers to the islands. They also symbolize wisdom, longevity, and endurance, often depicted in ancient petroglyphs and Hawaiian chants.

For many visitors, encountering a honu is a highlight of their trip, but too often, admiration turns into harmful behavior. Social media is filled with images of visitors standing too close, blocking turtles' paths, or even touching them. The obsession with the perfect photo fuels reckless behavior, and the consequences extend beyond a single vacation snapshot. Some visitors may not understand the risks, but others deliberately ignore warnings.

One visitor, Sandi L., pointed out that "tourists need to be told to leave the wildlife alone. I don't understand why they all want a picture with the honu."

Others who see the impact firsthand echo this frustration. Another commenter, Marianne C., emphasized the broader issue: "The way we treat wild creatures on this planet is often barbaric and completely selfish. We owe them as much help to survive as possible."

Legal and health risks.

Many don't realize that disturbing or harassing honu is illegal under federal and state laws. Under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, fines for violations can reach up to \$25,000. Enforcement officers are often overwhelmed, and ignorance is not an excuse, yet citations can be costly and drain limited resources.

Beyond legal risks, human contact threatens both turtles and people. Turtles can carry bacteria like salmonella, which can be harmful to



humans. At the same time, human interaction disrupts their natural behavior, increasing stress and reducing their ability to rest and forage.

The role of enforcement and education.

Hawaii's limited enforcement resources mean that education remains the most effective tool for protecting honu. With millions of visitors each year, officers and conservation volunteers do their best, but the sheer volume of tourists makes it impossible to monitor every beach.

One visitor, Peter R., noted the reality of the situation: "Too many tourists are breaking rules every day, climbing over fences, parking in no-parking zones, posing for selfies with protected wildlife, doing reckless things, and trashing trails. When you're only here a week or two, you don't see the heavy toll overtourism takes."

This is why self-regulation and awareness are crucial. More outreach is needed to ensure visitors understand the consequences of their actions before they step foot on a beach where honu are known to rest.

Social media's role in harmful behavior.



While social media can be a valuable tool, it has also significantly encouraged irresponsible behavior. Influencers posing close to turtles and other wildlife, and posts even go viral, further normalizing harmful actions.

One visitor, Sonja D., expressed frustration over social media's impact on wildlife: "I personally think social media should just be banned. People would have to get real jobs, and the beautiful places will once

again go back to not being trampled on; the animals (like the honu) will be able to rest in peace on the beaches.”

Hawaii officials have attempted to curb the problem by posting signage and increasing educational outreach, but without stronger enforcement and cooperation from visitors, the issue remains widespread.

What visitors should do instead.

The best way to appreciate Hawaii’s honu is from a distance. People should stay at least 10 feet away, avoid blocking the turtle’s path to the ocean, and never attempt to feed or touch them. If someone is seen interfering with wildlife, it’s best to notify authorities like NOAA or DLNR rather than directly confronting them.

Call 808-643-DLNR (3567) or NOAA’s Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

Education efforts have helped, but more needs to be done to make visitors aware before they arrive. Some conservation groups suggest mandatory informational videos on flights or required resort wildlife briefings.

Protecting honu for future generations

Hawaii’s honu have survived centuries, but only through responsible tourism. Protecting these animals is not just about laws—it demands education, enforcement, and personal responsibility.

As visitor Julie H. put it, “...if we want to keep the lure of Hawaii—lush, preserved habitat for tropical vegetation and wildlife—then we should



open our wallets and pay to protect it.”

For those who want to be part of the solution, supporting organizations like the [Hawaii Wildlife Fund](#) or learning more through [NOAA’s Marine Turtle Biology and Assessment Program](#) can make a difference. Ultimately, the best way to show respect for these iconic creatures is to give them the space they need to thrive.

We welcome your feedback and comments. Mahalo!

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34 thoughts on "Touching Trouble: Actress Faces Backlash Over Hawaii Wildlife Laws"



Dave

September 4, 2025 at 3:42 pm

Bravo to Hawaii and people of Hawaii for c
w  creatures. Foo upon people who are s
don t like being touched or crowded by people, it upsets them, and
they are vulnerable. Have some compassion please..



REPLY

David

March 10, 2025 at 4:14 am

Call US fish and wildlife and demand she be given a ticket. This wont stop till they are given tickets

 1

REPLY

Marge

March 8, 2025 at 4:08 am

Oh please. I live in Hawaii. The natives and the expats there don't even take care of the island. So much trash and homelessness and disrespect to the islands and the animals there. One celebrity pets a turtle then all of a sudden it's protect them and our island.

 2

REPLY

Dee

March 4, 2025 at 10:05 pm

of course she knew it was wrong as everyl
s*** do it because the law does absolutely
Education does nothing to stop this, comp
you truly, realy truly want to stop this, than fine them \$4\$50,000 and



one year in jail mandatory, no matter who or age. Then it will stop. Otherwise dont bother and stop whining about it.

 6

REPLY

Maleko

March 4, 2025 at 9:56 pm

In the days before social media we were on a tour to the backside of Lanai. While swimming offshore a teen member of the crew spotted Honus and grabbed one each side of the shell and it reacted by swimming down. The boy held on and let go maybe 10-15 feet deep. He said the local boys do this. At the time I assumed there was no harm. Maybe there isn't. Been many years but left lasting impression.

 2

REPLY

LS

March 4, 2025 at 9:27 pm

Airlines making an announcement regarding protected animals? Many passengers can't even obey the fasten seat belt sign! How will they then be "inspired" to respect wildlife if an announcement. How can any intelligent person touch a wild animal? This is their home not here for your entertainment or your sex

 



Daryl H

March 4, 2025 at 6:51 pm

It's just beyond my understanding how human beings can be so stupid and callous to disrespect and harm any of nature's precious and special creatures for of all the mindless things.....a selfie!!!
Shame On You!!!

 8

REPLY

Jack

March 4, 2025 at 6:03 pm

Opening your wallets, calling for enforcement, making more laws, spreading awareness.

All of this isn't going to do much. People walk up to giant Bison or even feeding bears. You think they're gonna stop and not approach our cute Honu?

We are all just to dumb and don't deserve our planet.

 5

REPLY



Larry L

March 4, 2025 at 4:03 pm

Years ago on every flight from the mainland to Hawaii, they would show a movie on board educating the passengers on the agriculture restrictions and explaining the Agriculture form that needed to be

filled out on board. It would be a good idea to have the airlines bring those movies back, and definitely include education on not touching the honu and other wildlife.

 6

REPLY

Bossa

March 4, 2025 at 3:35 pm

The cancer that is 'social media' has metastasized to the extent that the prognosis is 'terminal'....

I'm probably the only one that finds the lead photo for this article to be ironic ...

 4

REPLY

HNL-PDX

March 4, 2025 at 7:43 pm

I have never even heard of this actress. Who is she besides being selfish and self-entitled?

 3



Don

 4, 2025 at 2:09 pm

My state has the same problem. If a California sea lion pup washes ashore or is close to shore people want to go pet it or get some selfie

not realizing if human scent is on the pup the mother will abandon it. We have a local Solve program which corporate employees and the media all meet and pick up garbage all along the beaches. You name it and it's probably been found. People bring their habits on vacation and IMO treat Hawaii the same. I don't live at the coast but volunteer to clean it up. I've seen outdoor Hawaii eating tables with left over food and pigeons having a hay day. But Hawaii has a rule to never feed the wildlife. Overflowing garbage cans etc. Go figure.

 4

REPLY

Eva B

March 4, 2025 at 1:59 pm

Yes for mandatory informational videos on flights, but we also need more signs on beaches, especially those that are frequently visited by sea turtles. Put the enforcement # and fines right on those signs!

 6

REPLY

Marianne

March 4, 2025 at 10:58 am

The first line of defense in protecting nature is not opening our collective wallets and throwing money at the problem. It's using our common sense, so that we don't create an artificially short supply everywhere these

 5

REPLY



Shelley

March 4, 2025 at 9:05 am

There needs to be a sign at every beach trail on Maui. There is not one notice board (regarding turtles) on Kamaole 1, 2 or 3 in South Kihei. This is a highly populated tourist area. Often we have to tell people to stay away. A nice, clear sign would be very helpful.

 8

REPLY

Frank P.

March 4, 2025 at 9:35 am

As someone who has dealt with the public, and specifically tourists, for 35 years, I can tell you that signs are not read. Signs are posted for liability purposes. "There's a sign right there that says fire is hot, but they stuck their hand in it anyway." Not bashing tourists or people in general. I don't read most signs either. However, it is a good message to add to the "Shoreline is dangerous, and public property" signs. The one person in 100 that reads it may decide the selfie on a turtle is not worth it.

 5



Richard C

M.  4, 2025 at 8:57 am

The turtles are fine their population is growing by 2 to 3 percent a year. Only a very small percentage come in contact with tourist if they

feel stressed they will move to a different location.

Also tourists weren't responsible for the population decline; it was overhunting and gathering of eggs by both indigenous populations and foreigners of all races and colors that caused the decline in the turtles.

 13

REPLY

Jkiel

March 4, 2025 at 8:51 am

It's not just the turtles – the Honeycreeper bird is facing extinction more than ever, thanks to the cuts in federal funding in avian flu & malaria research.

Source – National Parks Traveler, nationalparkstraveler.org/2025/02/hawaiian-bird-species-risk-extinction-halt-federal-funding

 3

REPLY

Jay H

March 4, 2025 at 8:34 am

We can't keep visitors (mostly) from falling treacherous, trails in high heels, needing rescues, diving headfirst into dangerous waters, helicopter rescues 500 ft in the air, trespassing, defecating, disrespecting cultural sites, etc etc... How are you going to keep these same Morons away from the wildlife?



Best Regards

 10

REPLY

Deb

March 4, 2025 at 8:14 am

i realize flight attendants are busy but a brief announcement regarding wildlife would go a long way. people rarely read forms etc but most of us can hear.

 6

REPLY

Bossa

March 4, 2025 at 3:24 pm

With all due respect, is this comment serious ?
I'm all for the turtles (and have far less confidence & hope for us humans, especially in today's cultural climate) ...

 0

REPLY



Andy

March 4, 2025 at 7:36 am

V  even though she apologized, I still thi

 18

REPLY

Frank P.

March 4, 2025 at 9:37 am

Or community service. Narrate/star in "Don't touch the wildlife" videos to show on planes and baggage claims.

 3

REPLY

Kay

March 4, 2025 at 6:20 am

Visited many times between 1994 and 2017. Never crossed my mind to go near the honu or sea lions. Agree with Sonja, social media has gotten out of hand. Leave the cell phones in your pocket and enjoy the beauty of the islands.

 10

REPLY

Janet

March 4, 2025 at 6:02 am

When I was on Maui last September. I saw turtle , while it rested on the beach. I went to please stay back 10 feet to protect the t that they should. Maybe it can be brought c ^ ane?

 11

REPLY



Barbara L

March 4, 2025 at 4:49 am

Talking to idiots gets the same result as talking to a fence post. See if you can get the air hosts on the planes coming in to make wildlife announcements for you and the wildlife. They can do it several times during the flight with a reminder at the door., include how much the fine is, too. Use the flights to educate the idiots. Maybe they will learn something.

Favorite question when I worked at a pet store: does that animal bite? It has a mouth and teeth, what do you think? Was my best answer. I really wanted to tell them to stick their hand in and find out.

 6

REPLY

Lizzie

March 4, 2025 at 4:30 am

Aloha! My husband and I were at Paradise Cove (secret beach) on Oahu last year. We witnessed about 10 adults that were in a circle around a Honu. I immediately went up to the group to tell them that they need to keep their distance and to let the Honu swim away. They all looked at me like I was the crazy one. I explained to her it was the law. She said that they should have read the sign they walk on beach – it clearly states the rules. I went back on my hair. As the people left, they gave me them what to do. They felt so entitled to do what they wanted and not respect the wildlife. Mahalo for your informative article!

 14

REPLY

Laurie S

March 4, 2025 at 2:51 pm

Years ago we were at little Anini Beach on Kauai. A large Honu suddenly crawled up out of the water quite near us and proceeded to take a long nap! We just stayed on our beach towels and lay there sunning ourselves. Several people approached and thought the turtle was sick or dying like a beached whale. We told them that the Honu come ashore and rest quite often and just to be calm and quiet. After about an hour the turtle slowly made her way bsck to the water and paddled away! A beautiful experience and a reminder to people that this is normal Honu behavior.

 4

REPLY

Rich

March 4, 2025 at 4:24 am

I think there is an instant action that could be taken. A lot of this behavior is driven by social media. Approaching a Honu on a beach is a criminal offense. If the posters and publishers of these posts could be fined for creating or publishing posts about Honu, they would be blocked and demonetized on YouTube. If their stupidity they would stop doing it.



 10

REPLY

Dean

March 4, 2025 at 3:57 am

Perhaps instead of the survey on the back of the agricultural form, put tips for appropriate behavior while visiting Hawaii.

 16

REPLY

Mark W

March 4, 2025 at 3:54 am

Locals don't seem to care about the turtles. On Maui in 2022. Turtle came ashore and was surrounded by tourists. I established a boundary to protect turtle. Me and condo owner, a local, called every authority for assistance. No one, including lifeguards, seemed to care or be willing to protect the turtle. After a half day, I gave up. The turtle stayed there for 3 days before being carted off by the Whale Institute.

So, is the education problem with tourists or the locals?

 8

REPLY



Glenda

March 4, 2025 at 3:29 am

First of all, if the manpower does not exist enforcement/fines, staff must be increased. Second, the fine should be significantly increased (and not an up to amount, required amount) and the violator must be banned from coming to the Islands

until such time as the fine has been paid. In addition to fines, significant community service hours at a marine sanctuary, should be required. There must be consequences for people's actions. An apology does not cut it.

 8

REPLY

Patrick

March 4, 2025 at 3:26 am

Tourons are just limited to Hawaii. Look at the ones going to national Parks, etc. Trying to pet the Moose. Or the Bear. Take your pick. Too bad the Darwin awards couldn't go to more of them.

 7

REPLY

Michael

March 4, 2025 at 3:15 am

now that the current administration is cutting NOAA, contacting them for enforcement may no longer be an option.

 5




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