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Hawaii sea turtles have rebounded. Native Hawaiian traditions are still barred.

The turtles have long been a traditional food source for Native Hawaiians



Green sea turtles rest on a Maui beach with volcanic rocks in the background.
BirdImages/Getty Images

By **Christine Hitt**, Hawaii Contributing Editor

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Listen Now: Hawaii sea turtles have rebounded. Native Hawaiian traditions are stil

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Hawaii's formerly endangered green sea turtle population has rebounded in recent decades, with the species now a common sight along the state's beaches. While the increased populations have benefited tourism, with visitors gathering on beaches to take photos of the animals, some Native Hawaiians are asking when they, too, will be allowed to benefit from the rising population by harvesting turtles for food.

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"A lot of people, they think it's a bad thing, you know, especially, like, the outsiders that not from here," Native Hawaiian fisherman Miki Duvauchelle told SFGATE. "They come over here and you know, they just want to put all these laws, all these protections, and it's like, 'Hey, it's a source of food, just like a fish.'"

Fifty-year-old Duvauchelle was born and raised on Molokai. The island has no large resorts, and its residents have a history of resisting development and overtourism. There's no Costco or McDonald's, and grocery stores

are limited. Residents, he said, largely rely on subsistence living — hunting, fishing and gathering for their families.

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“Molokai is different. It’s hard over here. We really depend on the land and the ocean, and all these kind laws like that are really affecting the people,” Duvauchelle said. “The Hawaiian, we feeling like they’re trying to put us to extinction, you know.”

His late father-in-law, Bill Puleloa, was devoted to studying turtles and shared similar views about returning harvest rights to Hawaiians. “Make no mistake, the perpetuation of the species is of utmost importance to us Hawaiians,” Puleloa told the Honolulu Advertiser in 1998.



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“Thus, come the time when the population of turtles is judged stable enough to tolerate a limited harvest, we ask simply to be allowed to resume our millenia-old relationship with this culture,” Puleloa said.

The ban that ignored culture

The Hawaiian green sea turtle, or honu, as it is called in Hawaiian, was a traditional food source for Native Hawaiians, with the exception of those families who considered it aumakua, or family guardian, according to Daniel Jr. Akaka, the kahu hanai or knowledge keeper of Mauna Lani Auberge Collection on the island of Hawaii. Aside from food, the turtles were also used to make fishhooks and oil for medicinal purposes.



A historic photo of Native Hawaiian fishermen.
Hawaii State Archives





A historic photo of Native Hawaiian fishermen.
Hawaii State Archives

But population declines due to commercial fishing led to the green sea turtle's placement on the endangered species list in 1978.

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"It was a blanket listing, so it didn't consider at the time the importance of turtle use in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. It didn't look at any of that cultural importance," Asuka Ishizaki, the protected species coordinator for the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, told SFGATE. The council is one of eight regional

councils managing federal waters, and it has long advocated for the cultural harvesting of Hawaii's turtles while still prohibiting them from commercial fishing or sale.

Ishizaki said the endangered species listing lumped long-standing cultural practices with commercial exploitation, creating a tension that continues today.

"You going to get arrested and go to court, and no matter what you do, they going to find fault with you and put you in jail, charge a big fine, whatever, and that is something that we cannot control. This ban is part of their control," Kelson "Mac" Poepoe, a 76-year-old Molokai resident, told SFGATE.

Growing up before the ban, Poepoe said turtle was only eaten on occasion as part of a broader, sustainable gathering practice meant to avoid overharvesting any single species.

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"Maybe the state, the federal government need to learn about proper management and consult with the Indigenous people on how we do that because we've been doing that all our lives, and we never have problem until money came into the picture," he said.



An aerial view of the island of Molokai, where development and tourism are limited.
Michael Runkel/Getty Images/Collection Mix: Sub

Hawaii's 'threatened' species

Globally, green sea turtles are no longer considered endangered. In October, the International Union for Conservation of Nature changed its risk assessment for the species to "least concern." It found that global populations "increased approximately 28% since the 1970s" and that Hawaii's population is among those that are "close to pre-commercial exploitation levels."

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Despite this, Hawaii's green sea turtles remain listed as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act.

"In the United States, there are no existing federal authorizations or exemptions that allow for the take of sea turtles for food," a NOAA Fisheries spokesperson told SFGATE in an email.

"NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in collaboration with states and U.S. territory governments, share responsibilities under the ESA to protect and recover green sea turtle populations," the spokesperson wrote.

Federal officials last reviewed the species' status after the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs petitioned to delist Hawaii's turtles in 2012. The request was denied, with officials citing concerns about climate change.

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The California-headquartered nonprofit Turtle Island Restoration Network was one of the leading organizations opposing the change, submitting over 120,000 signatures. "In Hawaii, the honu are rebounding from just 67 nesting females to over 800 now. However, their population is far short of the published goal of 5,000 Pacific green sea turtles needed to declare them as recovered," the group wrote in its opposition letter.

"Do your duty to halt the current movement to allow the slaughter of Hawaiian sea turtles on public beaches for their meat and shells, to be sold to restaurants and turned into souvenirs," the organization continued in the letter. "Their continued survival depends on retaining protections under the Endangered Species Act and gaining safeguards for their critical habitats."



A large crowd forms around sunset at Poipu Beach on Kauai to witness a group of basking green sea turtles.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

Sea turtle scientist George Balazs, who worked at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for nearly 50 years, believes the population of turtles has increased enough that limited cultural take could be allowed while still prohibiting commercial fishing. A 2007 study he co-authored estimated the presence of around 61,000 turtles along the coastlines of the main Hawaiian Islands.

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"These days, the green turtles are here, there and everywhere," Balazs told SFGATE. But that wasn't the case in the early '70s and '80s, he said, recalling the time when turtles were served in Waikiki restaurants before protections were enacted.

"There are clearly indications, at least for the past 10 years, that there are places where the numbers of turtles and their effect on the ecosystem is exceeding the capacity of the ecosystem to support them properly," Balazs said.

A path to sustainable cultural use

Since the petition to delist the species was denied, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council has pursued other avenues to allow cultural use. In September, it sent a letter to the current federal administration asking for assistance in the matter and to initiate another review, but it has not yet received a response.

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If green sea turtles were to be removed from the U.S. endangered species list, Balazs said management would revert to the state of Hawaii. "The state must come up with a management plan, and that management plan needs to be monitored by the federal government for five years to make sure that it's working."

At that point, he added, "the state could allow an Indigenous take for non-commercial purposes" in limited numbers per year, depending on the management plan.



Hawaiian green sea turtles rest on a Maui beach.
Eddie de la Rosa/Getty Images

Poepoe doesn't expect every resident or even every Hawaiian to be interested in harvesting turtles. Still, he would like to see the ban lifted on Molokai for residents who want to consume them. The desire to harvest turtles isn't limited to Molokai, however; the council told SFGATE that it's heard calls to allow cultural take on other Islands, too.

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For his part, Duvauchelle said he would like to see a return to traditional Hawaiian practices of resource management. "The people who live there should be able to manage the harvesting, and there should be a limit to this. It cannot just be open season every day," he said.

"It's part of our culture, as Hawaiians, Kanaka, Pacific Islanders," he continued. "It's part of life. And people need to learn how to accept things, you know. A lot of people, they all fixing the ways, they got to try save the world, you know what I mean, but people got to realize that we part of the world, too."

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