
Fwd: On This Vital Hawaiian Road, Green Sea Turtles Create Gridlock

From George Balazs <honumazu@gmail.com>

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To honu world <itsahonuworldinhawaii@hotmail.com>

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From: **Joe Spring from Field and Lab** <joespring@substack.com>

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Field and Lab

On This Vital Hawaiian Road, Green Sea Turtles Create Gridlock

Tourists flock to Laniakea Beach to see the iconic animals, and traffic backs up on the Kamehameha Highway as the visits increase

JOE SPRING

SEP 16



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A turtle basks on Laniakea Beach. Joe Spring

This month I published a feature story in Sierra magazine on the resurgence of Hawaiian green sea turtles, or honu in Hawaiian. The species was nearly wiped out a half century ago in the state. Here is a short dispatch from my reporting of that piece, about a popular beach on Oahu's North Shore, where the turtles bask. An abbreviated part of this scene appears in the fuller Sierra magazine story, which you can read [here](#).

Hawaiian green sea turtles are so prolific that in one spot on Oahu they are causing a traffic jam.

On Laniakea Beach, they bask, or crawl up beach and rest, near the one road going in and out of the North Shore. Tourists flock here to see the turtles and park in a makeshift dirt lot on the land side of the Kamehameha Highway, and then have to cross the busy road to get to the beach, holding up traffic. On a May morning just before 8 a.m. I do just that.

I walk past some ironwood trees, and to a beach littered with rocks. "Honu Parking" signs hang from a tree, and other signs caution to give basking turtles ten feet of space. None of the creatures are up on the beach.

Back in the 1970s, almost no basking occurred around the Main Hawaiian Islands, and just sighting a turtle was incredibly rare. "If you saw a turtle, you saw it's ass as it was fleeing away from you with the greatest of fear," says George Balazs, a scientist who has worked with the species for more than 50 years.

Now, several turtles a day may come up on this beach packed with visitors.



Tourists take photos and video of a resting turtle. Joe Spring

A family from Texarkana, Texas, walks by. Rawlin Dumdel sits on a rock as his wife Ashley and daughter Fiona watch the surf. He saw a turtle swimming at Waikiki, but his wife and daughter did not. He wants his daughter to see a turtle, because, "that would be a core memory," he says.

"I like that you can see them on rocks," seven-year-old Fiona says.

His wife wants to see one, "Probably more than anything in Hawaii," she says.

But just before 9 a.m. the family leaves without a turtle coming up. They head further north to Shark's Cove, where they hope to see one swimming.

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At 9:30, the first turtle comes out of the surf—pushed by the ocean onto a rocky shelf covered in bright green algae, right in front of three tourists. “Oooh, Ahhh,” they exclaim while backing up to about 15 feet away and taking photos.

Seven more people crowd around and take photos. Waves wash over the honu, making it’s dark brown and yellow shell glisten in the sunlight. Occasionally it lifts its head and repositions it on the shelf. “They’re really handsome fellas,” says Debi Ray, a tourist from San Diego.



Signs caution to give basking honu space. Joe Spring

Around 9:42, two volunteers from a turtle non-profit called Mālama i nā Honu show up and stand among the tourists and share information about the basker. They will stay here through the day and rope off areas around the

baskers while educating visitors. All ages are excited to see the turtles," says volunteer Tonya Kratovil. "They'll wait all afternoon to see one."

"In a given day I talk to people from all over the world," says volunteer Denise Lopiano. The volunteers have met tourists from Japan, South America, and even someone on a break from Antarctica. Most people, they say, stay back and respect the animals' space, and often visitors police others. But both volunteers agree on the most difficult part of the job—getting here and finding parking.

As a boy looks through blue binoculars at the basking turtle ten feet away, the volunteers say it can take 20 minutes to drive from the nearby town of Hale'iwa, two miles away, to this spot.



Tonya Kratovil and Denise Lopiano inform visitors about honu. Joe Spring

The traffic that results from the turtles has become a major issue for residents of the North Shore trying to get to home or work. "I would call the traffic life altering," says Sean Quinlan, the state house representative from the area. "I know people who have changed their kids' schools. I know people who have

changed jobs. I know people who have moved somewhere else on this island, because they just didn't want to deal with the Lani's traffic."

He says addressing the traffic here is the number one issue for his constituents. Currently, efforts are underway to move the highway on the other side of the parking lot so visitors don't have to cross the road. That may be enough, but Quinlan wants to see more done. He would like to require tourists to park in Hale'iwa and take a bus to this spot, so visitation is more controlled.

"I get it. If I wasn't from here and I came on vacation, I'd be like, 'Okay, babe, like let's go see turtles,'" he says, later adding. "I just see them every single day when I go to the beach already, so it's not that exciting to me."

Read more about Hawaii's green sea turtles in my [feature article](#) in Sierra magazine.

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