

This Researcher Has Educated Others About Hawaiian Green Sea Turtles for More Than a Half Century

George Balazs continues to study turtles and share news about them with others



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George Balazs poses with a turtle on East Island in the 1970s. Courtesy of George Balazs

No scientist has worked harder for longer to understand Hawaiian green sea turtles than George Balazs. I recently wrote a feature [for *Sierra*](#)

magazine about the creature's recovery since the 1970s, and included his early work with the turtles. Here is a brief excerpt of that.

In 1969, George Balazs, a 26-year-old from California, and his wife, Linda, anchored their sailboat off the coast of Lahaina, Maui. When they came ashore, they saw a ramp where men were unloading live, roughly 100-pound Hawaiian green sea turtles from a boat into a pickup truck. Linda cried when she saw how rough the men were with the turtles. Balazs asked the men what they were doing. Taking them to a restaurant, they said.

Two years later, Balazs, who had a master's degree in animal sciences, began studying sea turtles at the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology. In 1973, he flew to a remote atoll called Lalo also known as French Frigate Shoals and now part of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument—to study nesting mothers. Over a summer, he camped on 11-acre East Island, just six feet above sea level and covered with roughly 30,000 screeching seabirds called sooty terns. He counted only 67 nesting sea turtles on that prime rookery and knew the commercial take he witnessed in 1969 couldn't be sustainable. Balazs went public with what he'd found and called attention to the plight of the turtles.

In 1974, the state made it illegal to hunt Hawaiian green sea turtles for commercial purposes but allowed individuals to harvest the creatures for home use. Four years later, both were banned under the Endangered Species Act. The population of turtles on East Island recovered to more than 800 by 2014.

Balazs is always quick to say he didn't raise awareness about the turtles alone. But he was a huge part of it, and his decision to go out to a remote atoll to monitor the turtles was a crucial move done at just the right time to save the species. Without his remote field work, no one would have known just how few of the turtles were nesting.

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But Balazs has done more than just count the animals. He has published numerous scientific studies and reports. He has trained others. I worked

for Balazs for six field seasons studying Hawaiian green sea turtles. And every year, for a couple of weeks before I went in the field, I would spend time with Balazs. In my early years he was training me on simpler things, on how to best tag, and measure, and assess the turtles. In later years, he was a mentor on my master's project to study tumors in the nesting females of East Island.



In 2014, hundreds of turtles would bask on East Island in the late afternoon. Joe Spring / NOAA

In my weeks with Balazs, I observed him work as a key honu—as the turtles are known in Hawaiian—communicator. We visited beaches where the turtles basked, and he shared information with visitors about turtle behavior. When he saw someone with a honu tattoo, he asked questions about when they got it and why. Sometimes he went into stories about honu history in Hawaii. If we walked into a shop that had cool turtle clothes or art, he would compliment the shop owner.

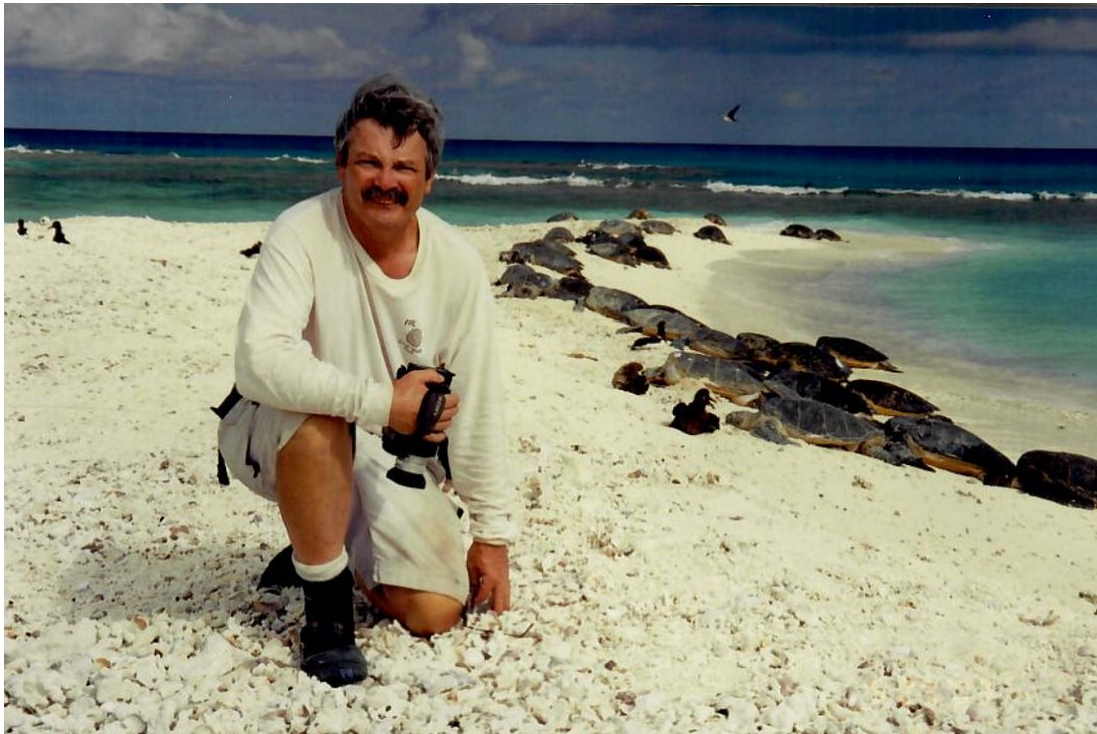
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Balazs is 82 years old now, and still sends out frequent emails with updates about Hawaii's green sea turtles. He's also working on a project on loggerhead sea turtles in the Pacific. And he still travels on field trips to learn more about turtles and teach others what he knows. When I told him I was writing a piece for *Sierra magazine*, he didn't hesitate to give me a chunk of his time. (As did many other dedicated scientists and conservationists, including those with NOAA, USFWS, the Sierra Club, Sea Life Park, and Mālama I Nā Honu.)

Balazs has seen the population rebound in amazing ways during the past half century plus. "In the late 1960s, early 1970s, you were hard pressed to find a turtle and see it almost anywhere," he says. "By the time the 1990s had come, my expression that I wrote was, turtles are being seen here, there, and everywhere."



George Balazs takes a break on East Island as basking turtles rest behind him. Courtesy of George Balazs

When he looks back now, he says that the state regulation passed in 1974 that restricted the commercial take of sea turtles helped them immensely in Hawaii. But he is also quick to give the turtles a lot of credit for their own recovery.

He's put much of his attention now into sharing what he's learned with others through his website and email newsletter. And he's spent time speaking out in favor of allowing Native Hawaiians to hunt turtles for subsistence use again, as individuals did after the state regulation passed and before the honu were protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Not everything is good news in terms of the turtle's future. Balazs calls one of the honu's prime nesting beaches—which is littered with decaying military infrastructure that traps and sometimes kills nesting mothers—a “death trap.” Just this year alone, turtles had to be rescued and helped there more than 1,100 times.

But the species is doing so much better than it was when he first started studying it. Since then, he has answered many questions about the animal and its impact. And when I ask him what the recovery of the species has meant to him, he has a simple answer. “Oh, huge satisfaction,” he says. “It's like, God can take me when he wants to. I've done the best I can.”

That's a nice kicker, but in truth, his emails and travels indicate he's not done yet.

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Joe