

# You Can Help Protect Hawai'i's Sea Turtles



Sea turtles are protected under state law and the U.S. Endangered Species Act. It is illegal to harass, take, kill or capture sea turtles. It is also illegal to import or export turtle products. You can help to protect Hawai'i's sea turtles by following these basic guidelines:

- Restrain pets and stay a respectable distance (>10 feet) from turtles both on land and in the ocean. Never block a turtle from crawling back to the ocean or from ascending to the surface to breathe. Chasing or following turtles causes stress to the animals, so please limit your interactions and allow them to approach you.
- Prevent marine debris – pick up rubbish at the beach.
- Call the following numbers in the event that you witness:

A sea turtle on shore during the day:

**1-808-983-5730** (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration MTRP)

A sea turtle on the beach at night:

**1-808-385-5464** (Hawai'i Wildlife Fund)

A sea turtle being harassed or suspicious activity involving sea turtles:

**1-808-643-3567** (Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement) or **1-800-853-1964** (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration OLE)

Designed and published by



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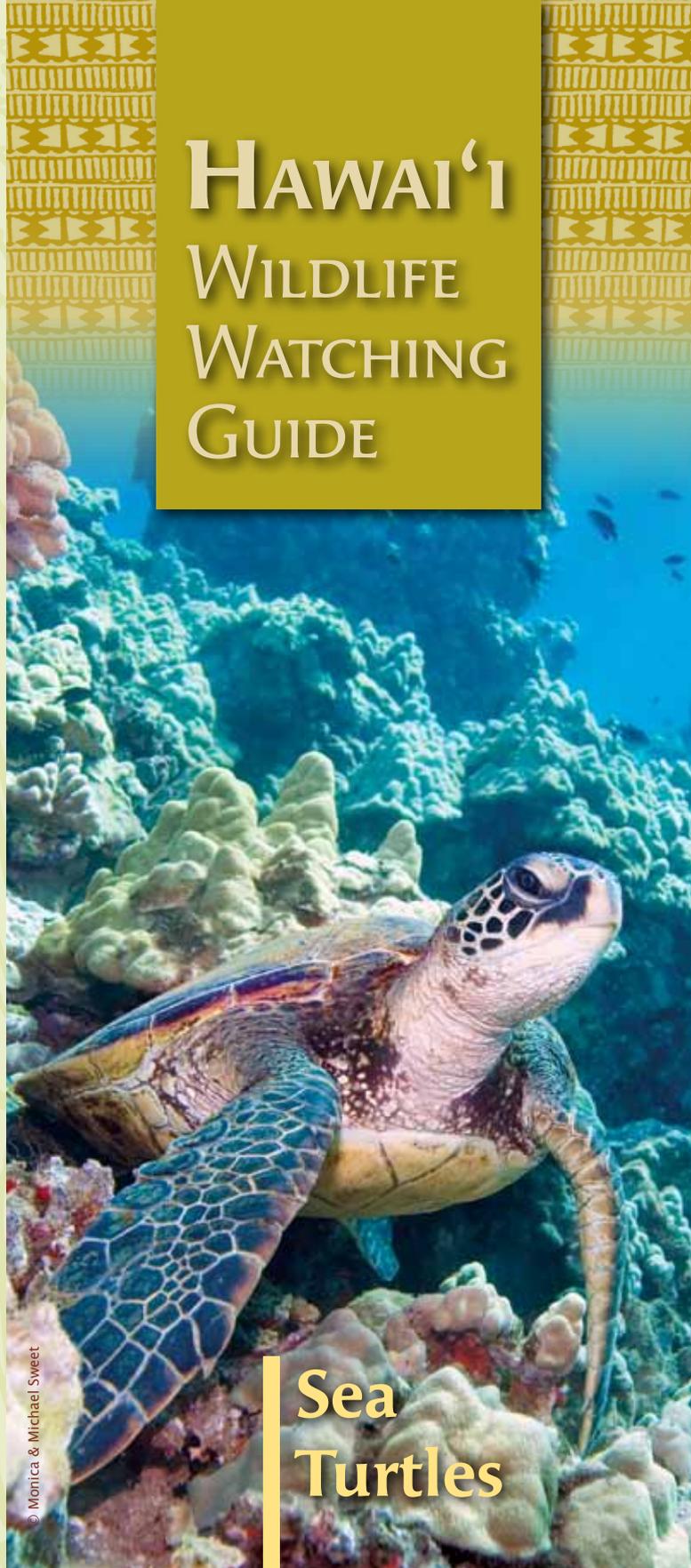
Special thanks to George Balazs, Marine Turtle Research Program, NOAA Fisheries Service; and Cheryl King, Hawai'i Wildlife Fund

Printed with soy-based ink on FSC certified paper.

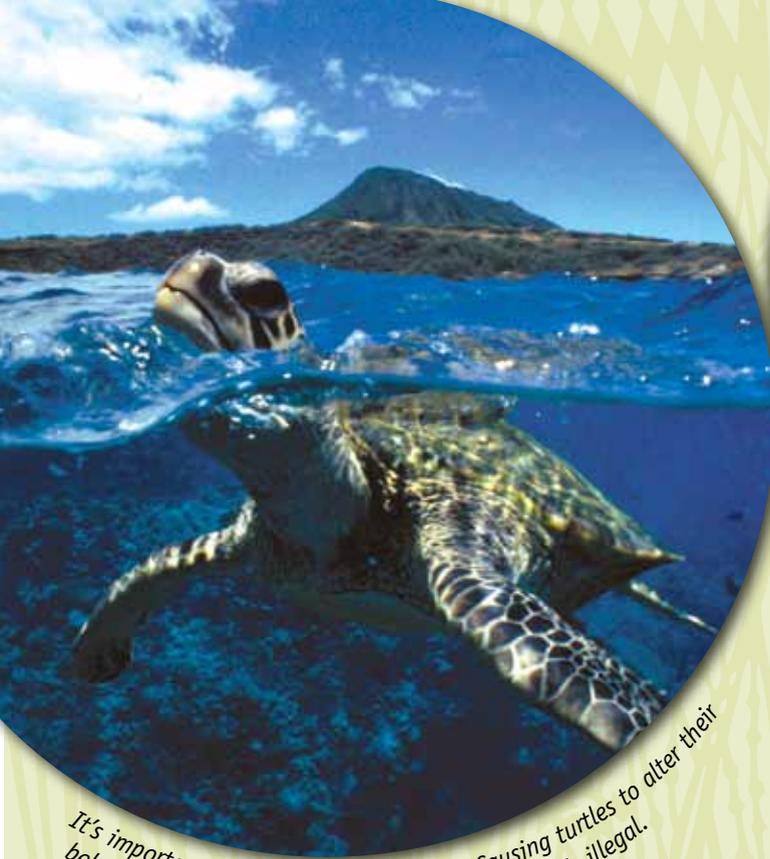
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# HAWAII WILDLIFE WATCHING GUIDE



## Sea Turtles



*It's important to give sea turtles space. Causing turtles to alter their behavior by disturbing, pursuing or chasing them is illegal.*

## Meet the Sea Turtles of Hawai'i



Sea turtles have resided in our planet's oceans for over 90 million years. These air-breathing reptiles are among the most fascinating of all ocean inhabitants. Sea turtles differ from land turtles and tortoises in that they cannot draw their flippers or heads into their shells.

Hawai'i is home to five of the world's seven species of sea turtles. Here in Hawai'i you are likely to encounter sea turtles during a snorkel, dive or boat trip. In certain shoreline areas, you may even spot a green turtle that has hauled out on land to bask.

The two species of sea turtles most commonly spotted in Hawai'i are green turtles, or honu, and hawksbill turtles, or honu 'ea. Leatherback, olive ridley and loggerhead turtles are also sighted on rare occasions in Hawaiian waters, usually further offshore.



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### Green Turtle

[*Chelonia mydas*]

Hawaiian name: Honu

Frequency of sightings in Hawai'i: common



### Hawksbill Turtle

[*Eretmochelys imbricata*]

Hawaiian name:

Honu 'ea or 'ea

Frequency of sightings in Hawai'i: occasional

Three other species are sometimes sighted in Hawaiian waters:

**Leatherback Turtle** [*Dermochelys coriacea*]

Frequency of sightings in Hawai'i: rare

**Olive Ridley Turtle** [*Lepidochelys olivacea*]

Frequency of sightings in Hawai'i: rare

**Loggerhead Turtle** [*Caretta caretta*]

Frequency of sightings in Hawai'i: extremely rare



## A Closer Look at: Green Turtles

*Honu • Chelonia mydas*

Visit Hawai'i's reefs today and you're likely to find green turtles gliding through the water, sleeping under shallow coral ledges, or sunning themselves on beaches. Once severely depleted, the endemic Hawaiian green turtle population has made a remarkable recovery under State and Federal protection.

### Green Turtle Facts:

- **Weight:** Up to 400 pounds at adulthood.
- **Length (of carapace):** About 40 inches long.
- **Coloration (of carapace):** Mottled dark brown top with radiating wavy and mottled markings of gold, olive and black.

## A Honu's Life

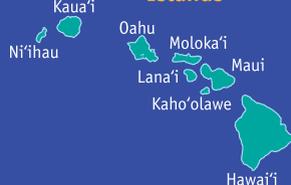


Most of the green turtles seen around the main Hawaiian Islands were born 500 to 800 miles away in the French Frigate Shoals, located in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Adult green turtles make the long journey back to their birthplace every two to five years to mate and nest.

### Northwestern Hawaiian Islands



### Main Hawaiian Islands



Female green turtles crawl ashore at night to nest. Each female deposits clusters of about 100 to 120 leathery eggs in the sand. The eggs hatch about 60 days later.

After they hatch, it takes a few days for the tiny turtles to dig upward to the surface. Once they emerge from the nest, they crawl to the sea, attracted by light reflected off the ocean. Some are eaten by crabs, birds and ocean predators. The survivors subsist on sea jellies, plankton and other invertebrates far out at sea.



It is unknown where the young turtles go for their first four to six years. The turtles then appear as juveniles along the shallow coastlines of Hawai'i's main islands.

As juveniles, they become primarily herbivorous. They are named "green turtles" for their green-colored body fat, tinted by the algae and sea grass they eat.

## Threats to Sea Turtles



Sharks are the only natural predators of juvenile and adult turtles. Before laws were established for their protection, hunting by humans caused a decline in the population of Hawai'i's sea turtles.

Hawaiian sea turtles face threats such as accidental catch, interactions with fishing gear, boat strikes, ecosystem changes, and ingestion of or entanglement in marine debris.



In addition, some hatchlings may be disoriented by lights emitted by human development, mistakenly heading inland towards roads and other dangers. Nests may also be threatened by feral animals.



Some Hawaiian green turtles have developed fibropapillomatosis (FP), a tumor-forming disease associated with herpes viruses. The virus is not contagious to humans, and researchers are working hard to understand its nature and causes. FP is the primary cause of sea turtle stranding and mortality in Hawaiian waters, but recovery is possible and prevalence seems to be decreasing.

Despite these threats, the outlook is good for Hawaiian green turtles. With continued protection and a growing population, the future looks bright.

## Researching Sea Turtles

In order to understand and protect Hawai'i's sea turtles, a number of ongoing collaborative projects are being undertaken by Federal, State and non-profit organizations. The scientists involved in these projects analyze, among other things, the breeding stock, habitat needs, disease outbreaks and overall population trends. Methods employed include tagging and satellite tracking.

## A Closer Look at: Hawksbill Turtles

*Honu 'ea • Eretmochelys imbricata*



*The hawksbill turtle's beautiful "tortoiseshell" carapace was exploited internationally for many years by the fashion industry.*

The hawksbill gets its name from its pointed, hawk-like "beak." This beak is an excellent tool for foraging among coral crevices for the sponges, invertebrates and algae on which they feed.

### Hawksbill Turtle Facts:

- **Weight:** Up to 250 pounds at adulthood.
- **Length (of carapace):** About 36 inches long.
- **Coloration (of carapace):** "Tortoiseshell" – mottled brown with dark and light spots and streaks.

Fewer than 20 female hawksbills crawl ashore at night to dig nests in the main Hawaiian Islands between June and October each year. The majority of the nesting occurs along the Ka'ū Coast of Hawai'i Island (the Big Island), with the remainder on Maui, Moloka'i and O'ahu.

Hatchlings typically emerge at night and crawl toward the sea. As with all sea turtles, bright lights on land can disorient them and cause them to crawl in the wrong direction. Crabs, non-native mammals, birds, ocean predators and vehicles pose threats to eggs and hatchlings. Surviving hatchlings live away from land until they reappear in coastal waters as juveniles.

Volunteers work to protect hawksbill nesters and their hatchlings in Hawai'i, but habitat loss and degradation pose significant problems for Hawai'i's hawksbill turtles.

