

Marine Turtle Newsletter

"He La Honu - Turtle Day 1995" in Celebration of Hawaiian Sea Turtles

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Several hundred people from all walks of life with a fondness for sea turtles came together on 25 November 1995 at Punalu'u Beach Park on the island of Hawaii for the first *He La Honu* celebration (translated as "Day of the Turtle"). The hallmark of festivities was the dedication of a bronze and lava stone monument in honor of the legend of Kauila and the green turtles that commonly feed in abundance in beautiful and historic Punalu'u bay.

The event was organized and hosted by high school students, teachers, and other members of the local community surrounding Punalu'u. Food was served in abundance and Hawaiian music groups played to everyone's delight. Various dignitaries gave congratulatory speeches on the accomplishment of the monument, with its educational message on the cultural and biological significance of sea turtles in this region. In addition, the newly published Hawaiian-English version of the "Sea Turtles - No Na Honu Kai" coloring book was distributed for the first time (courtesy of NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program and the Center for Marine Conservation).

The planning and construction of the monument resulted exclusively from private donations, including the creation of a unique bronze-relief disk by sculptor Dale Zarrella. Sponsors included the Honu Project, the University of Hawaii at Hilo's Marine Option Program, Ka'u Agribusiness, the Gummow family, and the Bakken family. The bronze plate on the monument reads:

The mystical turtle, Kauila, makes her home in the Ka'u district at Punalu'u Bay. According to Hawaiian mythology, Kauila was empowered with the ability to turn herself from a turtle into human form and would play with the children along the shoreline and keep watch over them. The people of Ka'u loved Kauila as the guardian of their children and also for her spring that gave them pure drinking water.

The presence of Kauila can still be felt today by the sea turtles that inhabit this special place. The Hawaiian honu (green turtle) can be regularly seen in the bay feeding on limu growing in the shallows. In addition, the honu'ea (hawks-bill) sometimes enters the bay at

night to crawl ashore and deposit eggs in the black sand. Both species of sea turtles are fully protected under the U. S. Endangered Species Act and wildlife laws of the State of Hawaii. Enjoy watching these marvelous creatures but please do not touch or disturb them in any way.

Celebrations on behalf of sea turtles are not a common occurrence, since most often there is little to celebrate among endangered and declining populations worldwide. Fortunately, while all is not rosy, there is indeed some "Good News" to herald in Hawaii. After nearly two decades of protection under the U. S. Endangered Species Act, Hawaiian green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) are clearly showing encouraging signs of population recovery. The annual average number of nesting turtles has more than doubled since the early 1970's, from 200 to presently around 500 per year. As a result, sea turtle watching in Hawaiian waters has grown to be an exceedingly popular attraction and ecotourism industry for visitors and residents alike.

The green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is among the largest marine turtles. The species is named after the color of its fat, which is thought to be tinted by its diet. Green sea turtles have been swimming the oceans for over 200 million years and are one of the few species on Earth to have lived through the evolution and extinction of the dinosaurs and ice ages, roaming the seas before the Hawaiian Islands even existed. Hawaiian legend is peppered with stories of this magnificent creature, including the green sea turtle 'Kauila,' who could change herself into a girl to watch over the cove. The Hawaiian green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is the most common sea turtle in Hawaiian waters. It feeds on marine plants in shallow coastal waters throughout the Islands. Green sea turtles are primarily vegetarian and eat limu (algae) growing underwater on coral reefs and rocks in shallow waters. The upper shell (carapace) of the adult is dark with olive or gold flecks. Green turtles received their name from the color of their body fat. The honu grows to an adult breeding size of 200 pounds or more. Every 2-5 years, the adult Honu migrates hundreds of miles to mate and nest in the Northweste