

Trapped in the Crossroads of Honu Conservation

By IRENE KELLY and JENNIFER HOMCY

It is no secret that the Hawaiian green turtle population is recovering. The International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List classified the population as “least concern” in 2012, and the 2015 Endangered Species Act global status review concluded that Hawaii’s population of approximately 4,000 nesting females per year was increasing at a rate of 5.4 percent annually, a significant achievement compared with only 37 nesters in 1973! The success of the Hawaiian green turtle, however, means that local *human* communities now face some new and unexpected challenges.

Sea turtles are a key part of Hawaii’s cultural and economic heritage. Historically, Hawaii’s abundant green turtles (or *honu* in Hawaiian) were overharvested, causing their numbers to drop precipitously during the 20th century. In the 1970s, state and federal protections were enacted, and the population responded as a result of strong commitments by native Hawaiians, residents, and wildlife managers. In the years that followed, the state experienced a tangible cultural and economic shift, as society moved from extractive to nonextractive uses of honu. Tourism is sea turtles’ principal economic value in Hawaii now, and honu have become a globally recognized symbol of Hawaii’s stature as one of the world’s top vacation destinations.

Today, honu are thriving in Hawaiian waters, and people are learning to live, work, and recreate around them. They are so abundant, in fact, that one would be hard pressed to go to the beach and *not* see a turtle in the surf or basking on the shore. Some residents are happy about the honu’s resurgence, whereas others express annoyance. Fishermen, for example, are challenged to cast a line in some spots without hooking a turtle. Beachgoers, too, must now share the beach with honu, because Hawaii is one of the few places in the world where turtles of both sexes and different age classes routinely emerge to rest on land. Honu sightings are a sought-after tourist attraction, and the turtles’ easy accessibility has not gone

unnoticed by the nature tourism industry, which brings visitors by car, van, and tour bus.

Although ecotourism can help improve public conservation awareness, it can also lead to irresponsible actions that may disturb resting or foraging turtles. Record tourist visitation and the soaring popularity of social media (announcing where honu may be seen at any moment) mean that interactions between people and sea turtles are frequent. Unfortunately, the potential exists for harmful and disrespectful interactions between people and turtles and between people with disparate interests. Managers are now confronted with the new challenge of finding ways to promote marine tourism experiences that are economically viable while balancing visitor expectations with the needs of the species, the environment, and the local culture. Furthermore, managing the intense pressure placed on local communities that find themselves trapped at the crossroads of conservation and their daily lives, with insufficient infrastructure to support the current and growing visitor numbers, has become an enormous challenge.

Over the past 20 years, Hawaii has witnessed a sharp increase in marine tourism, from surfing to SUPing (standup paddleboarding),

An aerial view of Laniakea Beach on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawaii, shows how people stopping to watch a basking turtle contributes to traffic on the adjacent two-lane highway. © PAUL JAVIER

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snorkeling, diving, kayaking, boating, and wildlife-viewing tours. Such tourism has led to growing infrastructure needs, ranging from restroom and parking facilities to traffic control on land and at sea. Residents in some areas report that it is common to sit in two hours of traffic for what would once have been a 15-minute drive. The frustration and anger are palpable, and many locals describe the delays and disorder caused by the hordes of tourists as “turtle traffic.”

Sadly, the feelings of reverence for honu felt by native Hawaiians and locals with generational ties to certain beaches or watersheds are now being overshadowed by frustration and conflict. Furthermore, some native Hawaiians or locals who may see an individual honu as their ‘aumākua (spiritual guardian) now harbor resentment when confronted with the disrespect paid to those animals by tourists who approach too closely for a “selfie” with a resting turtle, or when off-island interlopers attempt to tell the natives how to behave around what they perceive to be “their” honu. The “us versus them” animosity that such interactions have engendered is intense and undeniable.

At Laniakea Beach on the North Shore of Oahu, tourists park illegally and run across a busy two-lane highway to see basking turtles, thereby creating a turtle traffic bottleneck. Such conflict is on the rise throughout Hawaii as more and more turtles bask on beaches throughout the state and as communities struggle to make sense of their changing landscapes. The frustration deepens further as locals feel increasingly isolated—even abandoned—by the very agencies that are responsible for managing these conflicts. Wildlife enforcement officers commit almost no resources to enforcing harassment laws because no amount of human disturbance seems to deter turtles from thriving. The state of Hawaii and the Hawaii Tourism Authority (HTA) actively promote increasing tourism but simultaneously seem to resist costly infrastructure investments in roads, traffic management, parking, sidewalks, and parks or the implementation and enforcement of mandatory certification programs for ecotourism operators.

On the positive side, a number of community-based programs have emerged at two beaches on Oahu and Maui to manage and reduce negative human–turtle interactions. Volunteers dedicate time to educational outreach that promotes low-impact practices, such as viewing sea turtles from a respectful distance of at least 10 feet (3 meters). When people follow environmentally responsible guidelines, the turtles’ basking or foraging behavior exhibits little change, and tourists are able to enjoy honu while still getting their desired photos. Two managed beaches are just a start toward dealing with the statewide pressures. Thus, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and its local partners are actively working with HTA to encourage lawful and responsible marketing and messaging, to manage visitor expectations, and to promote respectful honu viewing by tourists.

Our modern green turtle story continues to evolve and is far from complete. We find ourselves at an important crossroads in defining our new norm and accepting the variable landscape of species recovery affecting both honu and people in Hawaii. ■