

HAWAII ISLAND HAWKSBILL TURTLE RECOVERY PROJECT 2007 SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

Report prepared by Will Seitz and Kyle Kagimoto



ALOHA HONUENA OHANA, the 2007 nesting season was a great success!!! From late-May to early-December, over 40 diehard volunteers tirelessly searched numerous sites along Hawaii Island's southern coastline for signs of hawksbill activity. Nests were found and protected at four beaches: Apua Point and Halape in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HAVO), and Kamehame and Pohue Bay in Kau. Eleven mama turtles were observed, eight of which we had not seen before this season. They went on to lay 38 nests, from which over 4,300 hatchlings reached the ocean. The first nest of the season was likely laid in late March or early April (before site monitoring began) and hatched out in June, making it the earliest documented emergence in project history!

This year, our project won the Hawaii Living Reef Award in the Government Agency category. It was a special recognition for all of the hard work that countless people have done over the years to help and protect this species. Since Larry Katahira founded the project in 1989, personnel have tagged 81 nesting turtles, protected 656 nests, and helped over 71,000 hatchlings reach the Pacific Ocean.

Apua Point: One newly tagged mama laid two confirmed nests at this remote, rocky beach. She could have laid more nests that we did not observe since nesting turtles are so discrete and we had to evacuate the beach for a week due to the threat caused by the recent lava outbreak at Makaopuhi Crater. From the two nests, project personnel made sure that all 270 hatchlings made it over the cobblestones and into the big blue sea. On a sad note, an adult female turtle that was tagged in 1999 and nested again in 2002 and 2006 was found dead amongst large boulders near the point. The loss of one adult female represents losing thousands of hatchlings.

Halape: This past season was the best so far at this backcountry oasis. More nests, nesting turtles, and hatchlings were documented here than ever before. Two turtles laid a total of seven confirmed nests and possibly more undetected. A third turtle crawled on the beach but did not lay eggs. This female was observed earlier in the season about 20 miles southwest at Kamehame. Despite hawksbills' high site fidelity, we have documented several cases of individual turtles nesting at multiple beaches. This is by far the farthest confirmed distance between nesting sites. Halape is famous for having nesting activity in the wee hours of the morning. On several occasions we were fortunate to witness nesting turtles in the dawn light and hatchlings emerging at sunrise. Nest sites were located at all the sandy pockets from the campsites to the lagoon beach to the tiki beach. From the seven nests, we estimate that 636 hatchlings reached the ocean.

Kamehame: Two turtles, one newly tagged and the other a returnee from 2002, laid eight nests at what has historically been the most prolific hawksbill nesting site in Hawaii. From the eight nests, over 840 hatchlings reached the ocean. A third turtle (the one that was also seen at Halape) was very elusive and had all of us wondering where and when she would show up next. While she was observed false nesting numerous times, no egg laying was confirmed. On another note, several groups helped with turtle monitoring and habitat management. Project partner, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), led by John Replogle and former Hawksbill Project technician Eldridge Naboa replaced the pig fence behind the beach. A turtle rewarded their group by showing up and laying a nest under a full moon. Another group, the Youth Conservation Corps students, led by Paul Keliioomaluu removed haole koa and Christmas berry from the nesting habitat and spent the night camping under the stars. These alien plants form dense root structures that make it difficult for turtles to dig egg chambers and entrap hatchlings.

Pohue Bay: For the past few seasons, Pohue Bay has been the most productive hawksbill nesting beach in the Hawaiian Islands and this season was the best ever! Records were set for the highest number of nesting turtles, newly tagged adult females, nests, and hatchlings. A total of twenty-one nests were laid by five mamas, ALL of which were newly tagged! A lot of exciting things happened at this beach. The earliest hatchling emergence in project history was followed by another nest that hatched out in June. Two three-flipper turtles nested. While each was missing one of their rear flippers, that's where their similarities end. One of the turtles went on to lay five very successful nests, completely on her own. The other laid two nests directly on top of the sand without even attempting to dig an egg chamber. Fortunately, both nests were translocated by project personnel. A lot of the success at this site is due to the cooperation of the land owner, manager, and caretakers who continue to be supportive of the project and have gone out of their way to protect the nesting habitat. We continued our mission of community outreach by hosting a teacher workshop with Mililani Browning and the Imi Pono No Ka Aina environmental education program. While project manager Will Seitz was giving a turtle talk, over a hundred hatchlings emerged in the afternoon light, leaving a lifelong impression on everyone who was there. In total, approximately 2,650 hatchlings reached the ocean from this magnificent beach. In the past three seasons alone, thirteen nesting turtles have been tagged, 50 nests have been protected, and over 7,000 hatchlings have swam through the shore breaks of Pohue Bay.

Kaimu and Kakiwai: Tracks were reported at both of these beaches by community members. We greatly appreciate their help. We need your kokua and are always happy to get reports of turtle or monk seal activity.

Keauhou, Punaluu, Horseshoe, Koloa, Ninole, Kawa, Kailiili, Kahakahakea, and Awili Point: Although no activity was observed at these beaches, they were checked regularly. Personnel either hiked or drove to these beaches nearly every day. Undoubtedly the volunteers hiked thousands of miles over the past six months. Needless to say, they couldn't eat enough ramen and oatmeal.

Other: We worked in cooperation with UH-Hilo, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and Hawaii Wildlife Fund to outfit two turtles with satellite transmitters. One of them migrated to the Hamakua Coast, the primary foraging grounds for Hawaiian hawksbills. The other swam along the windward coasts of the main islands, then surprisingly migrated over 800 miles to Johnston Atoll! In addition, we assisted NMFS and the state to translocate a Hawaiian monk seal from Mahukona to Keauhou in HAVO. The monk seal hung out in the park for a couple of weeks, then toured each of the hawksbill nesting beaches along the Kau coast. She was last seen at Pohue Bay and Awili Point.

Mahalo nui loa to the 2007 Volunteers, Interns, and especially Minky Markiewicz:

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