



# HAWAII ISLAND HAWKSBILL TURTLE RECOVERY PROJECT

## 2009 SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

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### ALOHA HONU'EA 'OHANA!

The 2009 nesting season was a huge success in multiple areas! This nesting season was the longest in project history and lasted 260 days, beginning in mid-May and ending in early February. Over 30 volunteers diligently monitored numerous nesting sites and searched endlessly for nesting activity along the southern coast of Hawai'i Island. Nests were monitored and protected at seven different beaches: 'Āpua Point and Halapē in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, Kamehame, Punalu'u, Nīnole, Pōhue Bay in Ka'u, and Waimanu Valley in North Kohala. Seventeen individual nesting hawksbills were identified and additional turtles were unidentified. Six of the 17 turtles were returnees tagged in previous seasons, while the other eleven were newly tagged. This tied the record of newly tagged females in one season set early in the project in 1993. These new recruits bring the number of adult female hawksbills tagged on Hawai'i Island to 100. Personnel documented and protected 60 confirmed nests, which brings the total nest count since 1989 to over 700. Volunteers helped over 5,600 hatchlings successfully reach the ocean; we now estimate that over 80,000 hatchlings have reached the Pacific Ocean since 1989. We are hopeful that the increase in new nesting females is due to project efforts over the last 20 years and will continue to increase.

**'Āpua Point:** Four turtles laid 15 confirmed nests; two nesting females were newly tagged. One of them was missing a rear flipper and personnel had to help her dig her egg chamber. She was able to nest successfully thanks to their help. Fifteen nests hatched out and as usual hatchlings here were assisted across the cobblestones to the ocean. These nests had an overall hatch success of 70% and approximately 1,310 hatchlings successfully reached the ocean.

**Halapē:** The most popular backcountry campground in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park also had a returning nester who laid four nests at this site. The three flippered turtle tagged at 'Āpua Point, five miles away, also crawled here. Volunteers educated campers on ways to minimize their impact on turtles and maximize their wildlife viewing experiences. This was especially vital because the nests were located directly in front of the main camping area. In addition to protecting nests with enclosures, non-native predators and plants were also removed from the nesting habitat. The average hatch success was 20% with approximately 162 hatchlings reaching the ocean.

**Kamehame:** Over the last several years, nesting activity followed a downward trend at this site. This year however, with six nesting turtles and 21 confirmed nests, Kamehame regained its' traditional status of hosting the most nests and turtles on the island. Four of the nesters were new recruits, the other two were remigrants. One of the re-migrants is the second turtle ever tagged by the project in 1991. This is her sixth documented nesting season over an 18 year period. Another turtle newly tagged at Punalu'u (three miles away) also false crawled along with a returnee that nested at Nīnole. Due to high surf at Kamehame, two nests were translocated this season and one had a hatch success of over 90%. If either nest had remained where it was originally laid, none of these eggs or hatchlings would have survived. We continued our primary mission to provide hands-on education to the community by taking two Youth Conservation Corps groups and students from UH Hilo camping here and teaching them about coastal conservation. The YCC assisted with alien plant control to protect the small and vital nesting habitat. Green sea turtles regularly basked at Kamehame and this season we were also lucky enough to spot a Hawaiian monk seal that has been using the beach to haul out and rest.

**Punalu'u:** Punalu'u was an exciting site for the project this year; one newly identified nesting turtle laid five confirmed nests at this site. Although tracks have been seen in recent years, these are the first documented nests here in five years and the most nests documented in a single season. This new recruit to the nesting population was originally tagged by George Balazs of NOAA in 1989 at Kīholo Bay as a 9 pound juvenile. While the only confirmed nesting from this turtle was at Punalu'u, she did travel 3 miles north to Kamehame as well. Nests at Punalu'u were protected with fence enclosures and educational signs were placed next to them to inform beach users of hawksbill presence. In addition to the nest protection, project personnel performed a tremendous amount outreach at this site talking with residents and tourists. Numerous school groups were educated about the honu'ea and helped with regular beach clean ups. Personnel conducted a public nest excavation outreach event where over 100 people attended, including local children and media. The excavation was a huge success and allowed children to release over 40 hatchlings.



**Nīnole:** Nīnole is a rocky beach located on the same property as Punalu'u. Tracks, digs, and plastron scrapings provided evidence of at least four crawls last summer. Personnel discovered two confirmed nests. The turtle utilizing this site was identified as a remigrant not seen in 10 years. The average remigration interval is about 3 years. She may have nested undetected at another site. She had been previously documented nesting at both Punalu'u and Kamehame, making this her third confirmed nesting beach! This turtle shows that despite high site fidelity, some hawksbills will use multiple beaches along the coastline. Furthermore, although we had previously documented hawksbill activity here, these are the first confirmed egg nests at this site. Personnel performed outreach to beach users through personal conversations and an educational sign. The average hatch success was 73% and 212 hatchlings were estimated to have crossed the cobblestone beach and reach the ocean.

**Pōhue Bay:** Twelve nests from three newly tagged hawksbills were monitored and protected. Personnel also continued to control invasive fountain grass on the property. The average hatch success was 67% and an estimated 1,300 hatchlings safely reached the ocean. This site continues to be one of Hawai'i's most productive nesting beaches.

**Humuhumu Point (Road to the Sea):** Tracks and digs from an unidentified nester were found on a daycheck. This is the second year in a row we found nesting activity at this site. It is unknown if this turtle is one observed nesting at Pōhue or an additional female.

**Keauhou, Horseshoe, Kōloa, Kahakahakea, Hāli'ipalala, 'Āwili Point:** Although these beaches were checked regularly for activity, we could have missed nesting activity because we did not camp at them consistently. Personnel replaced worn out educational signs at Kōloa, Kahakahakea and 'Āwili Point.

**Kāwā Bay, Ka'ili'ili:** Due to a conflict over legal ownership of these sites, personnel did not monitor here this season.

**Kamilo Point:** Again this season, island residents reported finding a weak hatchling in a tidepool.

**Mahana Bay:** A resident reported a hatchling crawling on this pocket beach near South Point. These are areas where the currents wash up debris so it is possible that the hatchlings came from another nesting beach northeast or it is possible that they came from unknown nests in the area.

**Waimanu Valley:** A former Hawksbill Project volunteer saw hatchlings and discovered a nest at this Hamakua Coast site. The nest was excavated by project staff. This is the first nest to be excavated at Waimanu, but the second time in project history that hawksbill hatchlings were found at this site. An estimated 77 hatchlings reached the ocean.

**Ha'ena:** Students from a local school taught by a former project volunteer discovered an egg on this lower Puna District beach. Upon initial examination, the egg appeared to be from a green sea turtle and undeveloped.

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