

Hawai‘i Island Hawksbill Turtle Recovery Project 2011 Season Highlights

Prepared by Will Seitz, February 2012



Aloha Honu‘ea Ohana! As you may remember, the 2010 season came to an end when a rare olive ridley nest hatched out in January 2011 near the Road to the Sea. Four months later, the first evidence of hawksbill nesting activity in 2011 was discovered in May. The field season extended 220 days until the last hatchlings made it to the waters off ‘Āpua Point on December 23. Thanks to your support and the dedicated efforts of a group of over 20 diehard volunteers, this 22nd season was another success. Sea turtle nesting activity was documented at six beaches on Hawai‘i Island: ‘Āpua Point and Halapē (inside Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park), and Kamehame, Punalu‘u, Kōloa and Pōhue Bay along the Ka‘ū Coast.

A total of nine adult female hawksbills were observed. Five of these individuals were newly tagged, while the remaining four individuals were returnees from previous seasons. These new recruits to the nesting population bring the number of adult females tagged on Hawai‘i Island to 110. The returnees came back after two to six year remigration intervals. In addition, one adult female honu, green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), was identified attempting to nest at Halapē. She later successfully nested at Pōhue Bay. She is the first nesting green turtle documented on Hawai‘i Island! A total of 29 confirmed hawksbill nests and one green turtle nest were found this season. There were likely additional nests that were not observed. Unfortunately, one nest at Pōhue Bay and at least two nests at Kamehame were washed away by record high surf. Approximately 3,000 turtle hatchlings are estimated to have safely reached the ocean from the nests protected by the project. The following are site summaries:

‘Āpua Point: Two newly tagged turtles laid six nests. Students from the Kalapana community witnessed one of the barnacle covered nesters returning to the ocean at dawn. Another nester showed up at 12 noon, the earliest daytime crawl in project history! An estimated 788 hatchlings reached the ocean, including 175 rescued by volunteers that were trapped by rocks. Without the volunteers, they would have all died.

Halapē: As mentioned above, a green sea turtle was observed attempting to nest at the beach in front of the campsites. However, she decided to nest 52 coastal miles away at Pōhue Bay. 2011 was the first time in 10 years that no hawksbill nesting was observed. Two Hawaiian monk seals were observed together hauled out at this beach.

Kamehame: Three returning turtles from previous years laid nine confirmed nests and possibly several more. Unfortunately, at least two nests were washed away by record high surf. Almost 700 hatchlings reached the ocean, including the first hatchlings of the season witnessed by students from the Youth Conservation Corps on a habitat restoration trip.

Punalu‘u: The heaviest hawksbill ever weighed in Hawai‘i was rescued from the pond behind Punalu‘u beach in June. Students and professors from UH Hilo along with George Balazs of NOAA conducted the rescue. She weighed in at 310 pounds. She nested a week later at nearby Kamehame. She was a returnee from 2005 and 2007 and had been seen at multiple beaches, including Halapē.

While most hawksbills have high nesting site fidelity, several do use multiple beaches. This turtle illustrated the furthest distance recorded between multiple nesting beaches at approximately 37 kilometers. Unfortunately, she was found floating dead in Punalu‘u Bay and sent to NOAA Fisheries in Honolulu. Her cause of death was inconclusive but she was described as “morbidly obese”. Additional hawksbill tracks were found here as well but we were unable to locate any nests. It is suspected this other turtle nested at nearby Kōloa.

Kōloa: Nesting activity was discovered at this small pocket beach adjacent to Punalu‘u for the second year in a row. One new turtle was tagged, three nests were located and an estimated 260 hatchlings reached the ocean. There were several additional possible nests. Third grade students, teachers, and parents from Volcano School were able to assist in the rescue and release of 14 live hatchlings during a nest excavation and cleaned up rubbish along the coast.

Pōhue Bay: Once again, Pōhue was the most productive hawksbill nesting beach on Hawai‘i Island. Three nesters laid 11 nests with 1,300 hatchlings reaching the water. Two nesters were newly tagged and the other a returnee from five years ago. In addition, the green turtle tagged at Halapē laid the first documented green turtle nest on Hawai‘i Island! The historic nest had a successful hatch rate of 80% with 40 baby honus reaching the ocean.

Keauhou, Horseshoe, Nīnole, Kahakahakea, Hāli‘ipalala, Humuhumu Point, ‘Āwili Point: No nesting was observed at these beaches. Beach checks were limited to daylight hours, so we could have missed signs of nesting activity since wind and tides may erase tracks made during the night.

Monk Seals: In addition to hawksbills and greens, Hawaiian monk seals were also observed at nesting beaches: ‘Āpua, Keauhou, Halapē, Kamehame, Kōloa, Nīnole, and Pōhue. One seal was identified as ID#: R4DF. Her nickname is “Makaiwi”. According to NOAA, she was originally tagged on Kaua‘i in 2007 and has a history of interisland travel, spending most of her time between O‘ahu and Hawai‘i with brief stints on Moloka‘i and Maui. She was also observed at hawksbill nesting beaches during the 2010 season. The other seal observed was ID# RB18. This male was born on Hawai‘i Island in 2007. They were both seen together at Halapē. Also, a beaked whale was found dead near South Point.

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