

HAWAII ISLAND HAWKSBILL TURTLE RECOVERY PROJECT 2008 SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

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ALOHA HONU'EA 'OHANA!

Although this season got off to a record slow start, activity picked up in late July and it turned out to be another successful season. The first nest was laid in mid-June and the last nest hatched out in early-December. Many memorable moments happened in between. Over 30 die-hard volunteers tirelessly searched numerous sites along Hawai'i Island's southern coastline for signs of hawksbill activity. In addition, they "talked turtle" with hundreds of beach users and educated them on how to be "turtle friendly". Nests were monitored and protected at six beaches: 'Āpua Point and Halapē in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (HAVO), and Kamehame, Ka'ili'ili, Pōhue Bay, and 'Āwili Point in Ka'ū. In addition, a new nesting beach, Humuhumu Point, was discovered. The most successful beach this season was Halapē, the HAVO backcountry oasis, which had record highs for number of nesting turtles, nests, and hatchlings. Overall, we documented ten nesting turtles (eight were newly tagged), 21 nests, and over 2,200 hatchlings in 2008. Since the project began in 1989, personnel have tagged 89 nesting turtles, protected 677 nests, and helped over 75,000 hatchlings get started on their journey into the big blue sea.

'Āpua Point: Two nesting turtles, one newly tagged and one a returnee from 2005, laid four confirmed nests at this remote, rocky beach. An estimated 419 hatchlings successfully made it across the cobblestones and into the surf. Many were assisted by the helpful hands of our dedicated volunteers.

Halapē: This beautiful beach at the base of Pu'u Kapukapu was the highlight of the season. The popular HAVO backcountry campsite was a favorite for people and hawksbills looking for a place to get away. We tagged three never before seen turtles and they laid nine confirmed nests. Halapē has long been famous for its sunrise turtles and this season was no exception. On several occasions volunteers and visitors witnessed nesting turtles in the dawn light. Throughout the season, personnel educated backcountry users on ways to minimize their impact on the resources and maximize their wildlife viewing experiences. Turtles and visitors were in close contact since most of the nests were located either inside or directly in front of the campsites. From the nine nests, we estimate that over 1,000 hatchlings reached the ocean.

Kamehame: Two newly tagged turtles laid four nests from which 663 hatchlings reached the ocean. We continued providing hands-on education to the local community by taking numerous student-aged groups on overnight campouts. The two Youth Conservation Corps groups were led by familiar faces, the first by former turtle project technician Eldridge Naboa and the second by Aku Hauanio, Paul Keli'iho'omalua, Brandon Figueroa, and Rico Amaar, all from HAVO Resource Management Division. In addition, two UH-Hilo classes spent a night under the stars. All of these groups were taught about sea turtles and participated in beach monitoring and one even helped with habitat restoration by removing non-native plants from the nesting habitat.

Ka'ili'ili: A newly tagged turtle laid one confirmed nest at this popular recreational beach, which derives its name from the many 'ili'ili stones that line the seashore. It is highly possible that she laid more nests undetected in the cover of darkness. This was the first documented activity here since 2004.

Kahakahakea: Tracks and a false nest were found in mid-May on an early season camp trip. Pōhue Bay and Kahakahakea were checked several times throughout the usual off-season (January to May) after several hatchling emergences occurred last year in early June. When the volunteers weren't busy hiking or helping sea turtles, they still had enough energy to remove the invasive fountain grass from the nesting habitat at a nearby site, Hali'ipalala.

Pōhue Bay: One previously unidentified momma and two nests were documented and over 250 hatchlings charged into the shore break. While the number of nesting turtles and nests were low compared to recent seasons, both nests had very high hatchling survival rates. The property caretaker and several UH-Hilo marine science professors, along with their families got to participate in the last nest excavation of the season. The excavation was a huge success and it was a great experience for everyone involved, especially the kids, who got to assist over 40 hatchlings to the ocean. For the second consecutive year, we helped with a teacher workshop put on by the 'Imi Pono no ka 'Aina environmental education program, led by Mililani Browning. We continued strengthening our partnership with the land manager, who is supportive of the turtles and our project.

Humuhumu Point: For the past few years, this beach has been surveyed on day hikes and thought of as potential nesting habitat. One of the big highlights of the season was confirming nesting here for the first time! While this is great news since it is only the 16th nesting beach documented on the island, the actual discovery was quite unfortunate. The dead body of an adult female and her eggs were found in a freshwater crack. She was tagged at Pōhue Bay, several miles southeast of this beach, in 2005. This a big blow as it represents the loss of thousands of eggs and hatchlings. However, now that we know turtles are using this beach, we will work to better monitor and manage this site and mitigate threats.

'Āwili Point: For only the second time in project history, nesting was documented at this black sand beach at the bottom of Road to the Sea. Tracks and digs were found and the area was marked. Ten weeks later, volunteers found the nest, from which an estimated 95 hatchlings reached the ocean. Another possible nest was found and it is likely that more undiscovered nests were laid at this site. The only other season that had confirmed nesting was in 2005 and it is possible that the turtle tagged that year was the same one that nested this season.

Keauhou, Punalu'u, Horseshoe, Kōloa, Nīnole, & Kāwā: Although no nesting activity was documented, they were all checked regularly. Personnel hiked to these beaches from where they were camping, some of these day hikes were over ten miles round-trip. Needless to say, over the past six months project personnel hiked thousands of miles and had many unforgettable experiences.

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