



Hawai'i Volcanoes News Release

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Living Reef Award Honors Those Helping Hawksbills



The Hawksbill Turtle Recovery Project, based out of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, received the 2007 Hawai'i's Living Reef Award.

The award honors the project's staff and volunteers who identify and monitor the primary nesting areas of the endangered hawksbill sea turtle on the island of Hawai'i. They were recognized for their outstanding commitment to protect and nurture Hawai'i's coral reef ecosystem.

Volunteers help newly-emerged hatchlings avoid predators and beach flotsam on their way to the sea. The hawksbill's beak-like mouth gives the species its name and will eventually let this hatchling reach into the crevices of coral reefs to eat sea sponges, its main adult food. Photo by Jay Robinson

Found in tropical and subtropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, hawksbills can nest on almost any undisturbed deep-sand beach. Adult females are able to climb over reefs and rocks to lay eggs in beach vegetation.

In the U.S. Pacific, hawksbills nest only on the beaches of the main Hawaiian Islands, primarily along the southern coast of the island of Hawai'i. Here, the turtle is called by its Hawaiian name, *honu 'ea*.

During the six-month nesting season in 2006, forty indefatigable volunteers searched numerous beaches for signs of *honu 'ea* activity. Nests were discovered and protected at three beaches within Hawai'i Volcanoes ('Apua, Keauhou, and Halape) and at two beaches south of the park (Kamehame and Pohue). The first nest was laid in mid-June and the last nest hatched out in early January.

Crews observed twelve *honu 'ea* haul ashore to lay eggs and held around the clock vigils on thirty-six nests, safeguarding the eggs and hatchlings from uninformed humans and alien predators—mongooses, and feral pigs and cats. Their efforts paid off.

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“Last season, volunteers helped more than 4,300 hatchlings safely reach the Pacific Ocean,” said Will Seitz, project coordinator.

The project operates on a small budget and thus relies heavily on dedicated volunteers who hike miles over lava rock to camp on remote, sun-baked beaches. Undeterred by centipedes, pounding surf, and tropical storms, they also collect the turtles’ tag data and record their life histories.

“They are trained to expect the unexpected, but last season Mother Nature threw everyone a loop when a magnitude 6.7 earthquake rocked the island,” said Seitz. Fortunately, all volunteers and nests were fine.

Since the Hawksbill Turtle Recovery Project started in 1989, the staff and volunteers have tagged seventy-three nesting *honu* ‘ea, protected 618 nests, and helped more than 67,000 hatchlings scurry to the sea.

“Each hatchling represents hope for the survival of the species,” said Seitz.

Although the hawksbill is protected by various international treaties and agreements and national laws, it remains endangered throughout its range. According to NOAA, the primary global threat to the species’ future is destruction and degradation of coral reef communities by human activities (i.e., pollution, toxic spills, and vessel groundings). Juveniles and adults depend on healthy reefs for their forage of sea sponges. Recent evidence suggests that global warming is causing higher incidences of coral diseases, which can ultimately destroy entire coral reef communities.

Hawksbills are killed for their translucent carapaces (shells) which are fashioned into hair clips, combs, jewelry and other trinkets. They are harvested for their oil, hides, eggs, and meat. Stuffed turtles are sold to tourists as wall hangings.

Other threats include loss of nesting areas from coastal development and beach armoring; disorientation of hatchlings by beachfront lighting; nest predation by native and non-native predators; marine pollution and debris; watercraft strikes; and incidental capture from commercial gillnet operations.