

## **Turtle House Offers Safety from Humans, But Not Sharks**

*By Ken Cable*

In the new dawn, the grey-black of the sea begins to lighten. Shafts of early morning sunlight reach into the depths to reveal an undersea garden of coral heads and sea grasses shimmering in and out of focus in a panorama as old as the reef they display. The residents are stirring, their images indistinct in the new light against the darker backdrop of the deep ocean. The dark bulks of *Chelonia mydas*, attended by a host of groomer fish, take form in the fading gloom.

This is the Turtle House at Honokowai, Maui, a kind of refuge for endangered Hawaiian green sea turtles. A diver hovers motionless just beneath its ceiling, his expended breath rising toward the surface in a tiny stream of bubbles from his ventilator.

The giant reptiles come to Turtle House to forage on sea grasses and to be groomed and cleaned. It is a place of rest and reverie from the perils of life in the open ocean. Here they are

relatively free from predation by the great sharks and from human hunters seeking their flesh and carapace.

Of course, ensuring that a tiger shark won't abruptly barge into the house and take its toll is impossible. Tiger sharks are abundant in the tropical and temperate regions of the oceans and are particularly fond of the waters around islands in the central Pacific. Sea turtles are a favorite prey. Not much can be done to protect *Chelonia mydas* from the tigers, but at Turtle House, human hunters may only visit, not kill or capture.

Entering Turtle House is easy. Sharks, snorkelers and scuba divers just swim in. The



-- Photo by D. Brumbaugh

*Chelonia mydas*, better known as the green sea turtle, is a favorite snack for tiger sharks.

walls are defined by the reef just off-shore and the unlimited vastness of the sea beyond. The roof is the sky that starts at the surface of the ocean and extends to the stars. The floor is a carpet of old coral, sea flora and sand. Why green turtles gather here can be speculated upon by their behavior. Lolling about, napping, feeding leisurely – and being attended to by schools of surgeon fish that groom and clean them of parasites and other foreign matter. It is their spa, and they are taking a break from the rigors of life in the open ocean. How they chose this small space off Honokowai is not known.

I wish I could say that I know all of this from my first-hand observations. From the vantage point of the lanai in our condo on the land edge of Turtle House, we can see the turtles surface for air out beyond the reef or rolling on the surface in gentle swells, but it has been years since we've snorkeled into their domain. The in-depth story of Honokowai's Turtle House comes from studies by other humans dedicated to the creatures' well-being and survival. A wonderful account of these pelagic reptiles may be reviewed at [www.turtles.org/aspects.htm](http://www.turtles.org/aspects.htm).

Our Turtle House is one of several such gathering places in the Hawaiian chain of islands. Not to be confused with their nesting beaches, these "houses" are favorite respite areas scattered throughout the Hawaiian archipelago. Hawaiian green turtles, and their cousins, the hawksbill turtles, are returning visitors. Both of these marvelous creatures are endangered, suffering from over-hunting and disease. They are now protected and staging a comeback throughout their habitat.

It was early November and my wife, Dorothy, and I were keeping vigil for the first sighting of the migrating humpback whales that navigate into the waters between our vantage point on Maui's west coast and the islands of Molokai and Lanai to breed and give birth. Our friends told us that no whales had been sighted in the days before our arrival, but several green turtles had ventured into the lagoon in front of our place. Naturally, by the time we arrived they had retreated to their house, only occasionally revealing their heads to breathe.

Hawaiian green sea turtles are smaller than their Atlantic cousins and nest almost exclusively on French Frigate Shoals, part of Hawaii's far-flung archipelago. In June 2006, President Bush announced the creation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument - 140,000 square miles of islands, shoals, coral reefs, shallow lagoons and deep seas. The new monument is larger than all other American National Parks combined, and is home to 7,000 species of marine, mammal, avian and floral life. French Frigate Shoals is about halfway along the archipelago and is the probable birthplace of the turtles now in residence at Honokowai Turtle House.

When not lounging about in their houses, green sea turtles spend their lives in the open ocean, migrating to their nesting beaches each year between April and September. When the females come ashore on French Frigate Shoals they leave behind the graceful aquabatics of their lives at sea for a lumbering journey up the beach to a place where they dig their nests and deposit their eggs.

Subjects of the reptilian kingdom have a variety of ways to propagate their species.

Relatively few stay by their nests to look after the welfare of their progeny. Sea turtles are among the species that labor mightily to deposit their eggs in a safe place, only to abandon the nest to nature and to chance. After about 60 days, the eggs hatch and the turtlings (my term), each weighing about an ounce, struggle out of the sand and immediately take off for the surf. Most don't make it, falling prey to a variety of predators. Those that do reach the water set out on a voyage in the deep ocean where they encounter even more predators, including man and sharks. Of the thousands of hatchlings that crawl out of their sandy nests, few survive to adulthood.

Not many generations ago, millions of Hawaiian green sea turtles roamed the Pacific; today there are an estimated 200,000 breeding females left in the archipelago. The creation of the new marine sanctuary in the Hawaiian chain and the ban on hunting should be enough to save this beautiful creature from extinction.

In our long tenure at our People House at Honokowai, we have watched a wonderful parade of wildlife pass by. Propelled by fin, feather and fluke, the toads in our gardens, the birds along the sea-wall, the fish in the lagoon, and the great whales, porpoises and green turtles, following the urgings of their instincts, never fail to fascinate.

Like the diver floating near the ceiling of the Turtle House this morning, we are content to watch.

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