

‘Lefty’ the turtle flipping through life | Hawaii247.com

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Special to Hawaii 24/7 by Caroline Neary | The Kohala Center assistant outreach and volunteer coordinator

One of the greatest things about ReefTeaching is getting acquainted with the Hawaiian green sea turtles that frequent Kahaluu Bay. Each day, ReefTeach volunteers educate visitors about the honu (sea turtles) we encounter as they are happily eating or basking.



ReefTeachers have become so familiar with some of these turtles that we even refer to a few of them by name —‘Rocky’ and ‘Lucky’ are two well-loved visitors to the bay.

Lefty’s flipper was entangled in light-weight fishing line and that isn’t a good thing, said George Balazs, leader of NOAA’s Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center Marine Turtle Research Program.

“Several wraps of it just tightened and tightened over weeks and likely months. The line constricted blood flow, hence the tissue and the bones ‘died,’” Balazs said. “The only way to save the turtle’s life was by surgical amputation of the flipper.”



Balazs said he was confident that following the surgery, the turtle would return to its Kahaluu residence and live a healthy life. The surgery would be performed by Dr. Robert Morris, an expert sea turtle veterinarian under contract with NOAA.

Balazs said his staff has recaptured numerous turtles in good condition with front flipper amputations by Dr. Morris months, and even years, after release.

“This turtle represents the 55th front flipper amputation procedure that Dr. Morris has had to conduct since 1998,” Balazs said. “Two were done in 2010. Our highest (worst) year was 10 in the year 2001. The responsible factor in all these cases was strangulation by active shoreline monofilament fishing line, and, in a very few cases, by monofilament gill net strangulation.”

On Feb. 22, just 10 days later, The Kohala Center received word the turtle was ready for its journey back to Kona. Justin Viezbicke, marine conservation coordinator, picked the turtle up at the airport the next day and accompanied it to Kahaluu for release.

Laura Livnat with the state Division of Aquatic Resources also assisted with transporting the turtle back home to Kahaluu.

On the afternoon of Feb. 23, “Lefty” (an affectionate nickname for turtle No. 663) was greeted by an entourage of ReefTeachers and spectators ready to welcome him back home. As the group made its way to the tide pool area where the turtle was originally spotted, Justin answered questions about the procedure and recovery.

The turtle was slowly carried into the water where he was carefully released. Once the turtle was placed into the water, he remained relatively inactive.

Oblivious to the photographers and applause, Lefty remained in the same area long after the crowd dissipated. It may have taken a day or so for Lefty to readjust to life back at Kahaluu Bay, but in the ensuing days and weeks there have been many sightings of him in and around the Outrigger tide pools.

His behavior appears to be normal, and we look forward to watching our friend grow in the years to come.

The Kohala Center extends a warm mahalo to Justin

Viezbicke, Laura Livnat, Dr. Robert Morris, and to George Balazs and his crew for treating Lefty and for helping bring our little friend back home safely.

The Kohala Center's volunteer ReefTeachers educate visitors about how to take care of our turtles, and we also teach snorkelers and swimmers to safely enjoy other reef animals at Kahaluu Bay. The team teaches visitors to the bay to identify and avoid touching live coral, and more about the different fish and invertebrates that inhabit the reef.



Learn more about volunteering at Kahaluu Bay at www.kohalacenter.org/kahaluubay/volunteer.html

To report stranded sea turtles or suspected injuries, call Justin Vizebeke at 808-987-0765.

For suspected law enforcement violations, such as killing, harming, or harassing a turtle, call the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service Law Enforcement Branch at 800-853-1964.

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