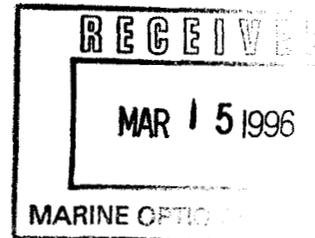


Sea Turtle and Monk Seal Stranding and Salvaging Group



Final Report

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Abstract

The Stranding and Salvaging Group, established by Mr. George Balazs of the National Marine Fisheries Service, Honolulu Laboratory, was successful in responding to 21 cases of stranded or dead marine turtles. Some of the turtles were retrieved and brought to the National Marine Fisheries Service laboratory where they were frozen for future necropsies. The agents found 13 of the 21 turtles reported. There were 8 turtle cases where the turtles were either not found, or found in an area not accessible to the agent (i.e. in the water). All of the turtles found, except one, were Green Sea turtles. The remaining turtle was a terrestrial turtle washed to sea. SSG agents kept detailed logs documenting each case in a log book. The logs included information such as the date of each case, time, location of the stranding, size and condition of turtle, and possible cause of stranding.

There were two cases in which Hawaiian monk seals were reported and responded to.

Introduction

The Stranding and Salvaging Group (SSG) was established by Mr. George Balazs, zoologist and leader of the marine turtle research for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Honolulu Laboratory, which funded this project. The objective of the SSG is to respond to all reports of monk seal and sea turtle strandings on the island of Oahu in the Hawaiian chain and thereby gain an increased understanding of the locations, numbers, sizes, health, and causes of the strandings. An SSG agent is on duty 24 hours for Saturdays, Sundays, and federal holidays, and Mondays through Fridays between the hours of 1600 and 0700 including state holidays.

There are seven species of marine turtles. Marine turtles in Hawaii include: "the green sea turtle Chelonia mydas, the hawksbill turtle Eretmochelys imbricata, the leatherback turtle Dermochelys coriacea, and the Ridley turtle Lepidochelys olivacea" (Stranding and Salvaging Group Contract and Statement of Work, Contract between the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Marine Option Program).

The leatherback is the largest weighing in at maturity from 650 to 800 pounds. The largest leatherback on record weighed in at 2006 pounds. The leatherback carapace is comprised of skin rather than shell.

The green sea turtle is the largest hard shelled sea turtle. At maturity, they weigh between 200 and 500 pounds. The hawksbill turtle averages about 100 pounds. The Ridley turtle are the smallest, weighing up to 100 pounds.

The main threat to marine turtles comes from commercial fishing and use. Sea turtle eggs are prized in many countries as a food source. The skins of the turtles are used as leather for hand bags and shoes. The shells of the hawksbill and some green turtles are prized for jewelry. Parts of the turtle, including the meat and cartilage, are edible and can be made into steaks and turtle soup. All sea turtles, hatchlings and adults, are preserved and sold as trophies and ornaments.

There are other threats to sea turtles besides for commercial purposes. These include:

"Incidental take," where turtles are accidentally caught in fishing nets where they drown.

Habitat destruction - beach development and human interaction that destroys nesting and feeding area for the turtles.

Subsistence hunting by native populations where their culture has used the turtles as a food source for

generations. These populations have not caused the decline of the sea turtles but may do damage on already endangered species (Ehrehfeld, Sea Turtle Fact Sheet).

METHODS

NMFS supplied the SSG agent with a field kit and storage facilities for all dead turtles. The field kit included heavy duty plastic bags, two large plastic trays, disposable gloves, disinfectant, measuring instruments, spray paint, tags, flagging tape, and a disposable camera to visually document the responses. A key to the Honolulu laboratory was also provided to the SSG agent for access into the storage unit.

The SSG agent carried a digital pager provided by NMFS at all times while on duty. Most strandings are reported to a 24-hour "hotline" of the State of Hawaii Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement (DOCARE). This information was then relayed by DOCARE to the SSG agent. Information obtained included the reporter's name, address, location and size of the turtle and the condition of the turtle. The agent responded to the stranding within one hour of the initial report from DOCARE.

At the scene of the stranding, the agent surveyed the area and best approach to safely handle the situation. The agent was not required to enter the water deeper than the knee to retrieve any turtle as safety is strongly emphasized. Data collected from the turtles included the length of the curved carapace, any external injuries, tag numbers (when applicable), location of tumors, and a possible reason for the stranding. If the turtle was dead, the agent bagged and tagged it and transported it to the Honolulu laboratory where it was stored in the freezer. Turtles that were too big to transport were defaced with spray paint to devalue the shell's worth and to notify people that the turtle was found (so as not to have it reported twice).

If a live turtle was found and it had injuries, it was taken to the Makai Animal Clinic, 420 Uluniu street, Kailua, Hawaii, 96734. No animals were taken during this period.

In all cases, the SSG agent left messages on the laboratory's answering machine with detailed information about the calls responded to. Any questions were directed to Mr. George Balazs who made himself available at all times. The agent was required to keep detailed logs for each case in a government provided log book, and monthly reports were turned in at the end of each month.

If a monk seal stranding was reported, the SSG agent was required to record any markings and scars on special report cards provided by NMFS. The agent also helped with crowd control. At no time was the agent allowed to handle a seal without trained scientific staff present.

RESULTS

SSG agents recorded a total of 21 cases of stranded sea turtles between the months of September and February. 17 cases were relayed by DOCARE to the agent on duty. The remaining 4 cases were reported by concerned citizens, or harbor masters. Twelve of the turtles found were green sea turtles; eight of the strandings could not be found, or could be seen but not accessible. The locations of the strandings varied around the island. The monk seal that came ashore at Ala Moana Beach Park had been sighted previously with a large hook caught in its mouth. Scott Bloom, the SSG agent on duty, contacted Tim Ragen, and Chad Yoshinaga, and then assisted in the removal of the hook. The second monk seal reported was not injured and returned to the water before the arrival of the SSG agent.

REFERENCES CITED

Ehrehfeld, David. Sea Turtle fact Sheet, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., USA, pp. 6-7.

Stranding and Salvaging Group and Statement of Work, Contract between the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Marine Option Program (MOP), University of Hawaii at Manoa, Contract duration: February 15, 1995 - September 15, 1995.