

Press Release

Date: October 4, 2024
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A Historic First: Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle Nesting, Rescue and Release on Kaho'olawe Island

Kaho'olawe, Hawai'i - May 15, 2024

A Historic Discovery

The Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission (KIRC) is pleased to announce the excavation and successful rescue and release of the first confirmed Hawaiian green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), also known as honu, nesting site on Kaho'olawe. This historical discovery, made during a routine monthly access, marks a significant milestone in the conservation efforts for this threatened species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This is the first time Kaho'olawe has been confirmed as a nesting site for the species.

“The discovery of this nest is not only a win for Kaho'olawe's ecological restoration but a symbol of hope for the recovery of the Hawaiian green sea turtle population,” said Michael Naho'opi'i, KIRC's Executive Director. “We have long worked to restore the health of Kaho'olawe, and witnessing this return of life to the island's shores is a testament to the progress we've made.”

On May 15, 2024, during KIRC's routine monthly volunteer access, base camp contractors (Dawson) on Kaho'olawe notified KIRC Ocean Program staff that they observed a green sea turtle digging a nest on the beach of Honokanai'a. The area was immediately marked and designated to eliminate all foot and vehicle traffic. In the following month, five other nests were identified, all on Honokanai'a beach within 100 yards of the original nest.

Excavation & Rescue Efforts

The excavation and rescue process began immediately after a thorough assessment by KIRC's Ocean Program Manager, Dean Tokishi. With unpredictable environmental factors such as beach erosion and visible feral cat predators threatening the survival of the hatchlings, KIRC initiated an excavation plan to recover the nest and release of any trapped honu. After informing NOAA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel, KIRC Ocean Program staff requested and was granted KIRC's Commission approval to conduct excavation of known nest(s) once the last day of hatching had passed and with the presence of

cultural supervision and direction of Lopaka Aiwohi of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana. In keeping with the KIRC's mission to integrate ecological conservation with Hawaiian cultural practices, the excavation was carried out in alignment with traditional Hawaiian protocols. Regarding the teams decision to return the emptied hatchling shells back into the ground, KIRC's Ocean Resource Specialist Christina Wine stated, "That was something I really liked about the excavation. Instead of being sent off to a lab, the shells were put back and respectfully re-interred, leaving the nutrients to sustain the native 'aki'aki plants living there."

On Monday, August 12, 2024 a group of 8 consisting of: Dean Tokishi (KIRC), Caroline Sabharwal (KIRC), Christina Wine (KIRC), Lopaka Aiwohi (PKO), Nicole Davis (NOAA), Jamie Thomson (NOAA), Irene Kelly (NOAA) and Sheldon Plentovich (USFWS) conducted the excavation in Honokanai'a of the first honu nest (#1) laid 83 days prior. 92 total eggs were laid and 87 hatchlings emerged resulting in a 95% success of hatching. The purpose of the excavation was (1) to determine whether or not the nest was a "true nest" or a "false crawl" and (2), if it was a "true nest" then the excavation would determine the success/mortality rate of the hatchlings.

On the morning of Tuesday, August 13, 2024, it was discovered that another honu nest had hatched the night before because of the hatchling track marks that were present. This nest (#5) was located toward the southern end of Honokanai'a beach. This nest was excavated later in the afternoon when conditions would be cooler and less stressful to any hatchlings that may still have been in the nest. 71 total eggs were laid with 69 hatchlings emerged and 2 hatchlings trapped in nest which were rescued and released. This nest (#5) had 100% success of hatching. Under the supervision of Irene Kelly, the Sea Turtle Recovery Coordinator with NOAA Fisheries, the 2 hatchlings trapped in the nest were released by Ella-Marie Akoni (12-yr old daughter of Dawson Contractor Peter Akoni).

"It was because of the committed presence and observation of our Dawson contractors that the initial discovery of the honu nest was made. It is also through the well rounded working relationship we have with our contractors that the excavation ran as smoothly and successful as it did." Stated Tokishi.

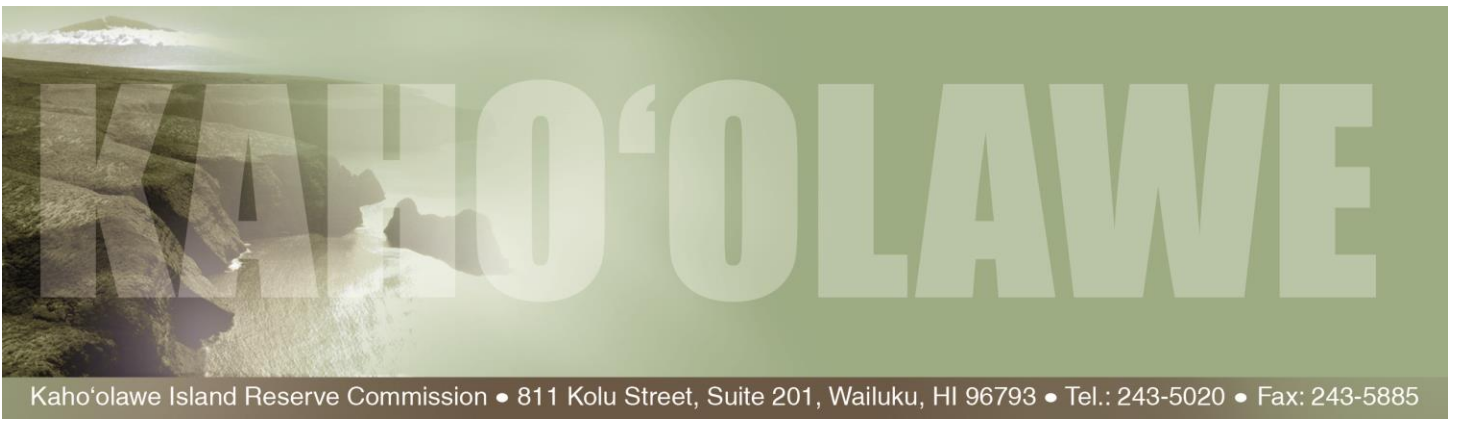
This green sea turtle excavation was performed under Federal Fish and Wildlife Permit by trained and qualified biologists. Endangered and Threatened Species Recovery Permit: ES39990 Version Number: 27

A Moment of Hope for Conservation and Looking Ahead

Over the last 20 years, one of the KIRC's Ocean program's focus has been removing invasive buffelgrass on the Honokanai'a beach and replanting with native 'aki'aki grass. When asked about the location of the honu nest found in the 'aki'aki grass, Dr. Sheldon Plentovich, the Pacific Islands Coastal Program Coordinator with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service stated, "The replacement of invasive buffelgrass with the native 'aki 'aki grass, undoubtedly made the area more suitable for nesting honu. Buffelgrass forms mats that would be difficult for a honu to dig through. The native 'aki 'aki grass grows more sparsely and honu can easily dig their nest chambers which are usually between 50 and 100cm deep."

"This is an extraordinary milestone for our conservation efforts on Kaho'olawe," said Naho'opi'i. This discovery represents a breakthrough in understanding the ecological significance and success of KIRC's decades long restoration efforts.

As the green sea turtle population faces ongoing threats from habitat destruction, climate change, and pollution, this event is a reminder of the critical need to protect and restore native ecosystems. KIRC is committed to continuing its restoration work to create a safe environment for vulnerable species on Kaho'olawe and the Hawaiian islands.



ABOUT THE KIRC

The Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission (KIRC) was established by the Hawai'i State Legislature in 1993 to manage the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve while it is held in trust for a future Native Hawaiian sovereign entity. The KIRC establishes policies and usage of the island and its surrounding waters through comprehensive restoration and monitoring programs. The KIRC Cultural Program integrates a Native Hawaiian cultural perspective into all programs and activities. The organization is managed by a seven-member Commission and a committed staff. For more information, call (808) 243.5020 or visit www.kahoolawe.hawaii.gov.

Administratively attached to the Hawaii State Department of Land and Natural Resources, the KIRC receives limited federal funds designated for State responsibilities in its effort towards the preservation, protection, and rehabilitation of the land, surrounding waters and culture of Kaho'olawe. The vast majority of the funds required to carry out these efforts are raised through grants from foundations, corporate sponsors and government agencies as well as charitable contributions from individuals. **To make a donation to the Kahoolawe Rehabilitation Trust Fund, please visit kahoolawe.hawaii.gov/donations or call us at (808) 243-5020.**

For a video clip of the turtle release, media inquiries or further information, please contact:

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Turtle hatchling tracks imprinted on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Irene Kelly*)



NOAA's Sea Turtle Recovery Coordinator, Irene Kelly counting the hatched eggs on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (Photo Christina Wine)



KIRC's Caroline Sabharwal counting the hatched eggs on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024
(Photo Christina Wine)



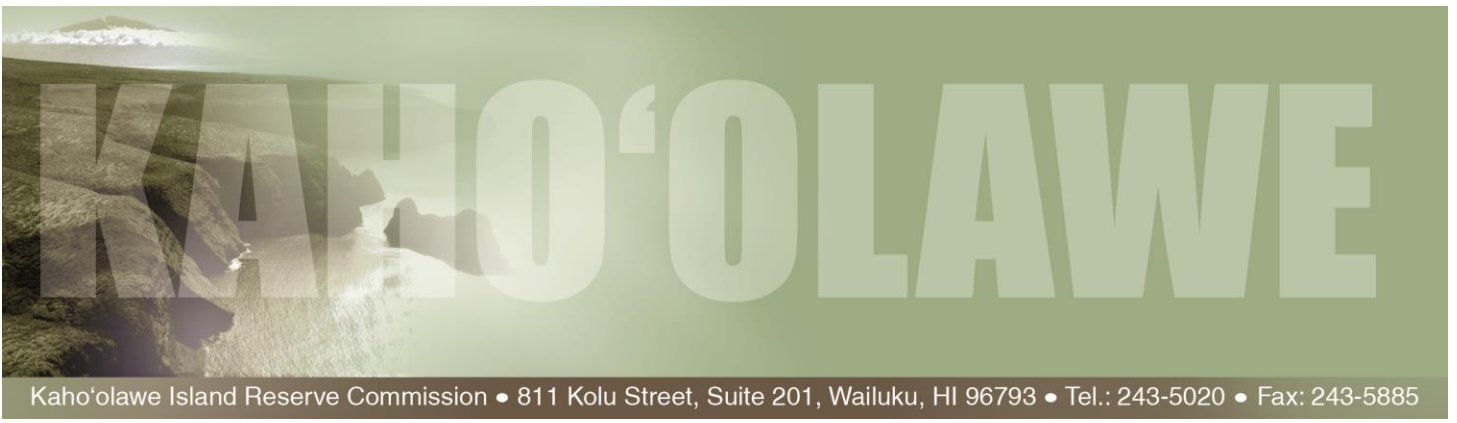
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KIRC's Caroline Sabharwal returning the hatched egg shells back into the nest to be covered on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Christina Wine*)



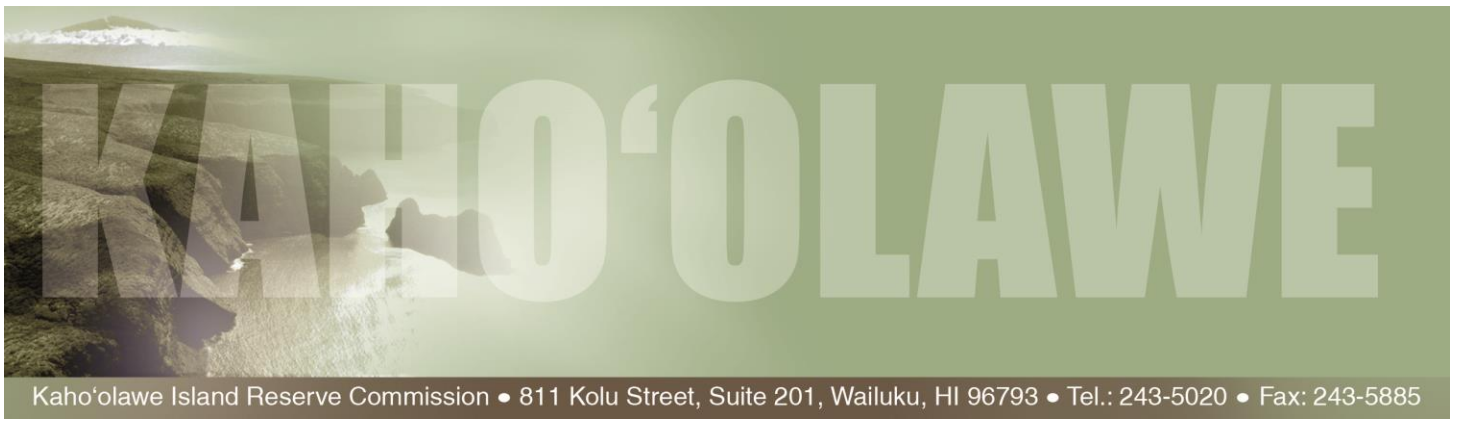
Two rescued turtle hatchlings that were trapped before being released on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Caroline Sabharwal*)



Two rescued turtle hatchlings making their way to the ocean on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (Photo Caroline Sabharwal)



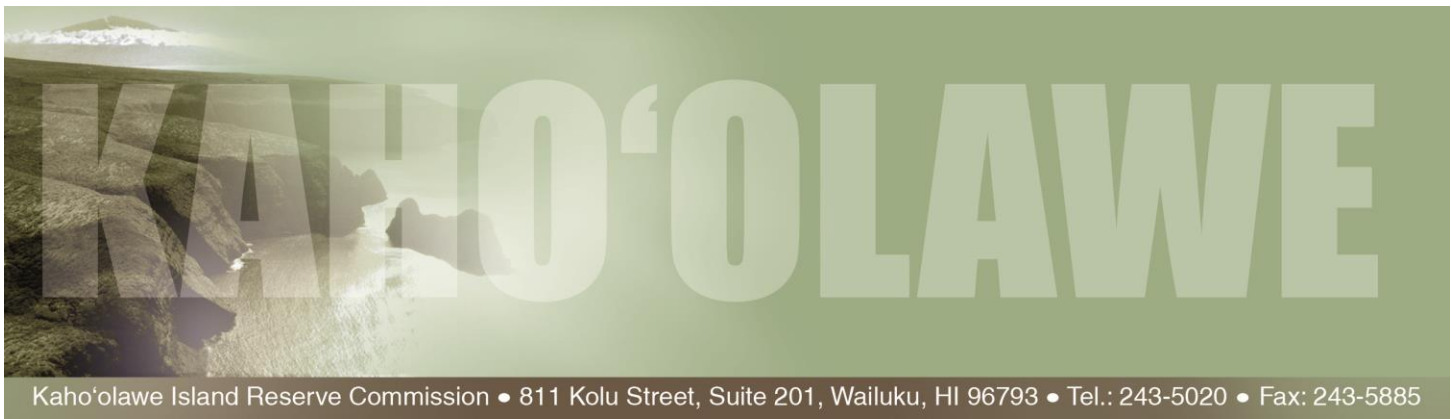
Two rescued turtle hatchlings making their way to the ocean on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Caroline Sabharwal*)



One of the two rescued turtle hatchlings making their way to the ocean on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Caroline Sabharwal*)



The second rescued turtle entering the ocean on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. August 2024 (*Photo Caroline Sabharwal*)



Members from NOAA, PKO, KIRC, Dawson, and UH pictured after the release of the two rescued turtles on Honokanai'a Beach, Kaho'olawe. From top left: Marz Hoyt, Calif Peat, Lopaka Aiwohi, Jamie Thomson, Lisa Gollin, Nicole Davis, Bruce Froemsdorf, Irene Kelly, Peter Akoni, Ella-Marie Akoni, Sheldon Plentovich, Dean Tokishi, Christina Wine, Caroline Sabharwal. August 2024 (Photo Johny Moniz)