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Bennett & Keuper-Bennett/The Book of Honu

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A promise is a promise, Lieutenant Dan.
—Forrest Gump

A promise kept

On a beautiful July day in 1988, a hundred yards from the West Maui shore and fifteen feet underwater, we had just finished photographing an eel. We looked up and there she was — the cutest thing we’d ever seen in any ocean. A sea turtle stole our hearts.

While we don’t know how she felt, we do know that upon seeing the little turtle, we were instantly infatuated. The next day, we saw her again. She was soon a regular highlight of our dives and lives. We eventually named her Clothahump, after the turtle wizard in Alan Dean Foster’s Spellsinger books, because that was the only turtle name we knew. Although we never learned whether she was truly a female, somehow we believed that she was.

She was exceptionally friendly. The following summer, she began coming to swim with us the moment we arrived at her reef. Over the next year, she grew quickly. We were happy to see her flourish. There were hints of trouble, however.

We’d met more turtles, but some of them had tumors. By 1991, the number of afflicted turtles was rising. In 1992, we noticed some suspicious white spots on Clothahump’s neck and shoulders. This worried us.

We saw her only once in 1993. The white spots had mushroomed into tumors. We both cried underwater. That day, we vowed to tell Clothahump’s story and somehow help the ocean community on her reef. We believed that the turtles were seriously threatened, and we promised to do whatever we could to save them. This book is a direct result of that pledge.
Finding answers

We began as two sport divers with an interest in underwater photography. We weren’t marine biologists and had no background in conservation. We knew nothing about the Hawaiian green turtle, or honu as the Hawaiians call them.

Our encounter with Clothahump eventually led to more than twenty-five hundred dives with honu. We accumulated hundreds of hours of videotape, thousands of photos, and a database containing notes on over 750 honu. That’s the longest and most detailed record ever made of a group of sea turtles in their underwater habitat.

Once we were interested in honu, we naturally became curious about them. We discovered that we could find ready answers to some of our questions: How long can they stay underwater? Where are they hatched? What do they eat? What threats do they face?

Other questions turned out to be difficult because the answers simply aren’t known yet and perhaps never will be. For example: How long do they live? How do they navigate during their migrations? Where on the high seas do they spend the first years of their lives? How do they survive out there? No one really knows.

We read what we could find, but aside from scientific papers, there was almost nothing about honu. By watching and documenting the turtles, we gradually learned the answers to some questions ourselves. We knew we had a lot more to learn, however, and the best way to do that was to consult the professionals.

In 1993, after we’d been watching honu at Honokōwai, Maui, for a few years, we attended the Thirteenth Annual Sea Turtle Symposium on Jekyll Island, Georgia. We learned — and continue to learn — much from the friends we made there and at subsequent symposia; however, our primary purpose for attending had an unexpected outcome.

We were eager to meet the experts because we thought they’d be able to give us insight into what we were seeing. To our surprise, once the turtle specialists heard that we’d been observing turtles underwater for years, they began asking us questions: How did we tell them apart, whether they got along together, if they had favorite spots, just what is it that they did all day long — the same sort of queries that everyone had.

We soon realized that there had been little underwater observation of sea turtles. In fact, we learned that almost everywhere outside of Hawai‘i, it wasn’t even a practical idea. It dawned on us that we had to find the answers ourselves.
This cut both ways. It was frustrating not to have the information we wanted. Yet it was exhilarating to find out that we were learning things that no one else appeared to know — that we were discoverers. With that perception, we also understood that we now had the responsibility of making our observations available to anyone as curious as we were.

You are reading our attempt to live up to that obligation. Our goal is to give you the book we wanted so badly in 1988. The organization reflects our own path of learning about honu: First we wanted to know where to find them, then we got interested in their biology, which led to investigating their life cycle and behavior. A scientist would approach the subject differently, but we thought this sequence would better suit a budding turtle enthusiast.

Although we’re writing about the Hawaiian green turtle, much of the
information also applies to sea turtles in general. When there are aspects that apply only to the Hawaiian green turtle, we’ll point them out. We’ll provide answers whenever we can and try to shed some light on the mysteries.

We’ll also share our own opinions and insights, starting with this: Sea turtles live a long time. Perhaps the most important thing we’ve learned from honu is persistence. In order to even begin to grasp the nature of the sea turtle, it is imperative to keep studying them for a long, long time.

That’s one reason it’s taken us seventeen years to get down to writing this book.