

The Great Ha Sea Tur Rescue

Remarkable ways people are saving these threatened creatures

BY CHANA STIEFEL



Tripod

Tripod, a 10-year-old Hawaiian green sea turtle, was in trouble.

A two-inch-long fishhook was lodged in its shoulder with a strand of fishing line still attached. A fisherman had snagged the turtle by accident. But as the 60-pound turtle—as big around as a bicycle tire—struggled to break free, the line snapped.

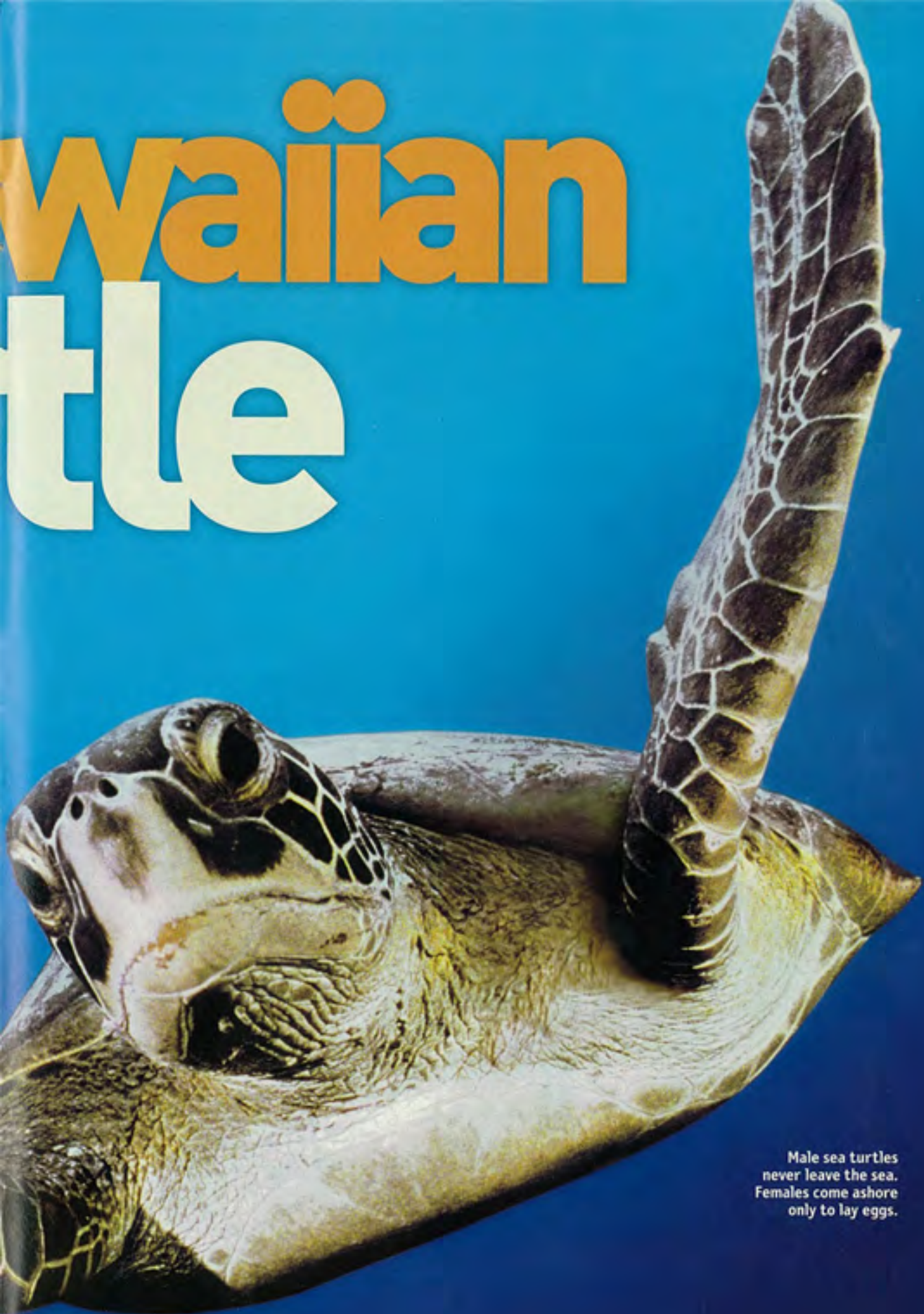
This wasn't Tripod's first mishap. The reptile lost one of its flippers (see above), which is how it got the name "Tripod," meaning "three-footed."



A green sea turtle hatchling gets a helping hand.



Hawaiian Turtle



Male sea turtles
never leave the sea.
Females come ashore
only to lay eggs.

The fourth, a back flipper, was bitten off by a predator, probably a shark. That wound healed on its own. But if Tripod's hook injury got infected, or if the fishing line entangled a front flipper, the animal might lose another limb. Could the turtle survive?

Tripod's predicament is common in Hawaii, where green sea turtles are a threatened species. Until 30 years ago, people hunted the reptiles for meat, eggs, and oil. "They would take large nesting females off the beach and sell them to restaurants for turtle soup," says Denise Parker, a researcher at the Marine Turtle Research Program in Hawaii. "The shells were used as decorations."



TO THE RESCUE

The turtles were captured faster than they could reproduce. Without protection, they would disappear forever. Thanks to the efforts of concerned researchers,

the turtles have been protected by law in the United States since 1978. "You can't harm, harass, or kill a sea turtle," says Parker. Fines for breaking the law can run as high as \$25,000, plus jail time.

But as Tripod's story shows, life for sea turtles isn't risk free. Though hunting for sea turtles is illegal, many still get caught and drown in fishing nets (above). Some turtles accidentally swallow fishhooks entangled in the seaweed that they eat. Foraging for jellyfish, they may also eat floating trash like plastic bags or balloons, which become a deadly meal. Other fatal injuries come from collisions with speedboats racing over the reefs.

HELPING HANDS

Scientists trying to help turtles are tracking their growth and life cycle. Shrimp fishermen are required to have special nets that trap shrimp but release large turtles. There's also a sea turtle hotline that gives advice to anyone who finds stranded or injured sea turtles.

Luckily for Tripod, a photographer diving off the coast of Oahu spotted the turtle and called the hotline. Parker answered and rushed to the reef. Together they transported Tripod to a vet for emergency surgery to remove the hook. "Within six hours of its capture we had Tripod back in the water," says Parker. "When we released it, the turtle swam as fast as it could. Then it stopped, poked its head up as if to say, 'Thank you,' and took off."



Green sea turtles get their name from the greenish color of their fat.

By the Numbers

Only 1 of every 1,000 eggs laid by female sea turtles will survive to become an adult sea turtle. Here's why:

1,000

eggs are laid, buried on sandy beaches.

800

sea turtles hatch. The rest never fully develop.

400

scurry off the beach into the open ocean. Others are eaten by crabs, birds, and fish.

200

survive two to five years at sea. The rest are eaten by predators or get caught in fishing gear.

1

survives to be 30 to 70 years old. The remaining ones fall victim to sharks, capture, and disease.



Some people think sea turtles cry. Actually, "crying" is caused by glands near their tear ducts washing out salt that they take in from food and the ocean.



Rescuers release a healthy sea turtle.

You can't harm, harass, or kill a sea turtle.

Fines for breaking the law can run as high as **\$25,000**, plus jail time.



Hatchlings scurry to the sea. Each weighs about an ounce.



A full-grown sea turtle can weigh 400 pounds. That's big enough to cover the hood of a Volkswagen Beetle.

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