

On the Beach

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

They've made it. Often their goal was completely out of sight as they flipped their way across a wide stretch of loose, windblown dunes—slipping, stumbling, sliding, but never pausing, never stopping. Gulls and crows swooped low overhead, each watching and waiting for a chance to seize one of the frantic newborns before it could find the safety of the surf. But now the first barrier is behind them and the tiny turtles are part of the great Pacific now. A very tiny fraction of them will come again to these shores. They will struggle up the beach in the dark of night, scoop out a cavity in the sand, and begin the cycle once more.

The beach is called Nakatajima. The *-jima* part of the name means island, and this stretch of south-facing beach on the coast of Shizuoka Prefecture was once a series of long, thin barrier islands built up from wave-borne sand. Over the centuries, the lagoons between those islands and the mainland were filled in and cultivated; only in a few places do seasonal brackish ponds remain. The city of Hamamatsu grew up nearby and the human population exploded. Small communities sprouted just inland from the beach and pines were planted to hold the dunes in place; now there is a hundred meters of dune-creased shore between those groves and the sea the Japanese call the Enshunada. But before this strand held its first human footprint, the hawksbill turtles were coming here, riding the rhythm of the seasons to lay their eggs and continue the life of their species. They still come, but each year becomes more difficult and the turtles are fewer. And if few come, that means fewer are born, and still fewer will survive to return.

In recent years, a total of about a thousand female turtles have made their nocturnal landings each year during the mid-May to late August nesting season. Each lays between

75 to 150 ping-pong ball-sized eggs. After about two months of incubation in the warm sand, these hatch into a clutch of 10-centimeter miniature turtles that immediately begin their fast-forward scramble toward the sea. It all sounds so basic and natural and easy. It is not, especially now.

The late 1980s saw the beginning of a boom in the popularity of four-wheel-drive vehicles; that boom shows no signs of abating as newer, sportier, cheaper 4WD models appear almost monthly. The 40 kilometers of Nakatajima's dunes are a magnet for herds of off-road drivers, especially in the summer—just when the hawksbills are nesting. Not only do the vehicles' lights and noise frighten off the females looking for a place to come ashore, but the drivers have difficulty even seeing the dark and inconspicuous turtles as they dig their nests in the sand and often run over them, killing the turtles and leaving their uncovered eggs open to the elements.

Lack of governmental response—prompted by connections to automobile manufacturers and dealers, according to many local residents concerned with the turtles' fate—has resulted in a 2,000-member local volunteer organization, Sanctuary Japan, setting up a system of wee-hour patrols along Nakatajima beach. Using cellular phones, the volunteers report the location of turtle nests, easily found because of the female turtle's telltale tracks. The eggs are removed and reburied in an enclosed area. The hatchlings are gathered up and allowed to make their run to the sea as their forbears have done for millions of years. But one wonders what kind of a beach they will have to come back to. ■

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