

Turtle Tales

Sea turtles are fascinating creatures. They frequent the shores of Hawaii and are often depicted with decals on the car windows of tourists who've seen them while visiting one or more of the islands. Turtles in Hawaii can grow to two or three feet in diameter but are commonly seen about a foot in size.

Jeannette and I saw our first turtles on the south shore of Kauai west of Poipu. We had spent a week mostly along the east shore near Kapaa and the north shore near Hanalei. But, toward the end of the week we went to the south shore for three adventures -- to visit the Grand Canyon of the Pacific, view the Na Pali Coast, and ride horseback along the coast.

In the early '80s the south shore hadn't yet been developed extensively. The road along the deep erosional canyon formed by runoff from the wettest location on earth at the top of Kauai was remote and offered few attractions except the turnouts to view the canyon. The color and layering of this canyon looked much like the original Grand Canyon in Arizona, but smaller in size.

The second adventure was to view the Na Pali Coast from above. The scene at the end of the road near the head of the Canyon was especially attractive -- the view to the west from about 5,000 feet above sea level, and down along the Na Pali Coast. These erosional features on the Na Pali Coast contained undulating green forested areas separated by large gulleys of red volcanic ash and was inclined at about sixty degrees upward from the ocean below. The beauty of the vista was impressive.

Several years after viewing this gorgeous scene, I read a technical article that suggested the steep erosional surface was likely not due to slow, gradual wearing away by rain and runoff, but rather, by a sudden, catastrophic collapse of the western side of the island. There was evidence of collapsed material scattered along the ocean floor for miles to the west of Kauai and records of damage to coastal homes and structures along the shorelines of China, Japan, and Polynesia far to the west suggesting tsunamis had caused the destruction. Giant tsunamis likely crossed the ocean and struck unsuspecting shore dwellers following the

collapse of the Na Pali Coast into the sea. And, similar features that exist on some of the other islands, like the north side of Molokai, may be evidence for other catastrophic slumps.

Go visit this view of the Na Pali Coast from above, if you have opportunity, or travel along the coast at sea level in a Zodiac rubber boat. The lava flows, the water falls, the wild goats scampering among the cliffs, the occasional whale leaping from the ocean, and the crashing of large waves against the outcrops of rock along the shoreline, all inspire awe of God's magnificent creation.

Or an even better approach to view the Na Pali Coast would be to hike the Na Pali Trail that winds along the Coast, into the canyons, and under the water falls. On this trail, that meanders along the eroded face of the exposure and changes elevation dramatically, one can experience an up-close-and-personal contact with this palisade. Early Hawaiians performed the hula as a religious dance along this trail on platforms facing westward along the Na Pali Coast.

But, getting back to the third adventure, we rented horses later that day and rode along a coastal trail on the south shore of Kauai that alternately wound among old sugar cane fields and sandy beaches. We could view the waves lapping the shore to our left and mountains rising to our right. After a few miles our wrangler led us to a rocky outcrop overlooking a small bay. As we stood looking out to sea, we noticed something in the waves swimming to the surface and then disappearing again beneath the water. As we watched more carefully, we realized we were seeing sea turtles frolicking and feeding in the surf. They were small to medium in size and occasionally holding their heads above the water.

This location on an isolated beach watching sea turtles playing freely, gave us the sense of seeing nature in its pristine state. When I mentioned my enjoyment of watching the turtles to our wrangler, he said, "Well, enjoy it while you can, because condominiums are scheduled to be built all along the shore beginning in the next few years. I couldn't imagine this area being commercialized because it seemed so remote and desolate.

But, on another visit to Kauai with our friends Lin and Al McNab, some twenty years later, we had reserved a week at a timeshare near Poipu. We happened to select a period of stormy weather which produced very high winds,

cold temperatures, and rainy weather on the north shore near Princeville. But, on the south shore where we stayed, only the strong winds were bothersome. The temperature was pleasant, and the skies were clear. Because of the sea breeze which generally blows from northeast to southwest over the Hawaiian Islands, the southern side of the islands have a desert-like climate.

Our timeshare was built on a small hill overlooking the ocean with a series of lakes, gardens, and waterfalls cascading downhill to near the ocean. It was a beautiful view, but one we didn't use to advantage until later in the week because of so much sightseeing elsewhere. As our activity level decreased near the end of our stay, I took time to walk around the resort property early in the mornings and discovered that turtles were swimming in a small bay near the ocean side of our condo. I invited Jeannette and our friends down to the shore to see the turtles.

While watching the turtles playing in the waves a vague memory struck me. The scene before me looked familiar. Then it hit me. This was the spot Jeannette and I had visited by horseback years before when we discovered, "Turtles in the wild!" We were vacationing in a timeshare our wrangler had sadly told us was coming. It looked nothing like the vacant beaches and cane fields from before. Large, elaborate condominiums were everywhere. Cars, people, and development crowded the beach. Yet, here were our turtles, still rising up and down in the waves, just as before, not paying any attention to the onlookers peering into their world.

I experienced strong emotions at the realization of what had happened to the turtles' domain. The wilderness was gone. Civilization had come. The remote beach with its turtles no longer existed, but a new, beautiful place had been constructed in its place. It was nice but seemed artificial in many ways. Yet, the turtles had survived, and didn't seem bothered in any way. Why was I so melancholy? Was the new place good or bad? And, even now, over twenty years later, I still haven't been able to completely sort out my feelings.