

It was roughly 6 a.m., and I had just fallen into that deep, dream-intensive slumber that seems only to come to me in the last hour of sleep, when Pono woke me up by saying “Judy, there’s something happening”.

It had been a beautiful, sumptuously-starred night. A changing cast of characters had cycled through on nest watch duty and those of us planning to stay until morning got to sleep late. The ocean crashed rhythmically in the moonless, salt-flavored darkness. Having seen no evidence of emergence by early, early morning I threw caution to the winds and allowed myself to fall all the way into sleep.

Orion, our transmittered female hawksbill sea turtle, was last identified by satellite to be on her way to Kauai. She’d done a noble duty, laying four nests of roughly 200 eggs each in the deep golden sands of Oneloa, or Big Beach. Undoubtedly lightened and preoccupied with thoughts of forage, driven by ancient priorities and urges, Orion was finished with reproductive duty for this year and the next. We would hope to see her again in 2006.

This was one turtle who loved to back up to things when choosing a nest site. All 4 of her nests were dug near the tree line, a good long crawl from the sea, with nest #3 a particularly problematic one--laid as it was smack on the well-trodden trail to Little Beach from Big Beach. Packed down by a gazillion feet and complicated by the cinders falling off Puu Olai (“thunder hill”, a large, charismatic landmark of a cinder cone), the hatchlings of Nest #3 were sealed and pounded into the beach and didn’t do too well. When the nest was excavated on Day 71 only a few very limp hatchlings were brought up into the world, and the rest were dead, cooked, trapped.

But this nest, Nest #4, was in nice, loose, big-grained sand. Volunteers started watching it on Day 58. Last night had been Day 59. All night long we’d taken turns shining a flashlight on the rumpled sands over the nest to detect any motion, any sign that 1-200 miniturtles were swimming their way, en masse, to the surface. The stars wheeled by, the Milky Way swept over, the night cooled, the trees swayed with freshening winds, and Eric, Pono and I finally felt the chances of an emergence were diminishing with the growing light in the east.

So, like I said, I was in the murky, hallucinatory lands of deep dreaming, with my sleeping bag over my face to ward off the rising sun, when Pono-- already up and standing over the nest--woke me with the quiet excitement in his voice.

There was a depression in the sand that hadn't been there before. And furthermore, there was a periodic heave inside of that depression, like a long-contained sigh or a suppressed hiccup. We whipped out cameras and paperwork. At 8:25 a.m., a very odd time by hatching standards as it's best and most usual for emergencies to occur under cover of dark, a tiny reptile head with sandy eyes emerged, beak pointed straight up.

Heaving. Heaving. The sand heaved all around the body of this first, somewhat lethargic hatchling.

I reached out a tentative finger, swept it around that first hatchling to see if it was somehow stuck, and felt the tips of many noses. And just then, as if I'd tickled them all, there was a boil of hatchlings. An upwelling of hatchlings. The earth gave birth and gave birth and gave birth some more. Hatchlings galore. Hatchlings on a mission, a river of windup little turtles headed to the sea with everything they had. We smoothed the sand in front of their little greybrown bodies and watched them race by, flippers churning and eyes on the future.

A surge of sand, a boil of life, a mad scurry for the sea, the wash of the waves...and it was 8:30. It took less than five minutes for 180 hawksbill sea turtle hatchlings (as meticulously and heroically counted by Pono) to swarm into life and reach the sea on a path of gold.

We stood in the wet sand and grinned at each other like maniacs. "Pono," I said, "this one was for you. You stood over that nest and pulled them up with the force of your will". And then I caught Eric's eye. "Jude," he said, "have I told you that I love my life?"