

REPORTS

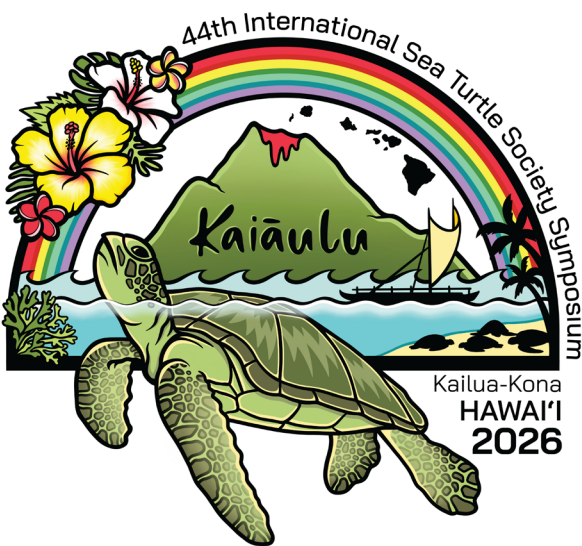


PRESIDENT'S SUMMARY REPORT: 44TH INTERNATIONAL SEA TURTLE SOCIETY SYMPOSIUM, 28TH FEBRUARY TO 6TH MARCH 2026, KAILUA-KONA, HAWAI'I, USA

ALEXANDER R. GAOS

President, International Sea Turtle Society

agaos808@gmail.com



INTRODUCTION

The 44th International Sea Turtle Society (ISTS) Symposium was held from 28th February to 6th March 2026 in Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i. This meeting marked a historic milestone as the first symposium hosted in Hawai'i or anywhere in the Pacific Islands, bringing the global sea turtle conservation community into a region where sea turtles are deeply embedded in cultural, ecological, and spiritual systems.

Convened under the theme *Kaiāulu*, the symposium emphasised interconnected relationships between people, place, and environment. This framework shaped both the design and delivery of the meeting, guiding an approach that placed equal value on scientific exchange, cultural grounding, and community well-being. The result was a symposium that not only advanced scientific knowledge, but also intentionally created space for reflection, dialogue, and connection across diverse perspectives.

PLENARY PROGRAMME AND INTELLECTUAL IMPACT

A defining feature of the 44th ISTS Symposium was the structure and impact of its plenary programme, which, together with the Opening Ceremony, was intentionally designed as a cohesive intellectual and cultural foundation for the week.

The symposium opened with a traditional Hawaiian oli and blessing, grounding the meeting in place and establishing a tone of respect, connection, and shared responsibility. Invited speakers emphasised themes of stewardship, responsibility to place, and the deep relationships between people, place, sea turtles, and ocean. This opening was not simply ceremonial; it set the conceptual framework for the sessions that followed, reinforcing the symposium theme of *Kaiāulu* and positioning conservation within broader social, cultural, and ethical contexts.

Building on this foundation, three plenary sessions moved beyond traditional keynote formats to create space for dialogue around complex and, at times, contested issues in sea turtle conservation.

The first plenary, *Pacific Island Nations, Shared Seas: Indigenous Perspectives on Sea Turtle and Marine Conservation*, elevated Indigenous leadership and Pacific Island voices, centring customary stewardship, cultural relationships with sea turtles, and the integration of traditional knowledge into conservation practice. This session reframed conservation as a process grounded in place, culture, and community, rather than solely as a scientific or management exercise.

The second plenary, *Headstarting Revisited: Effectiveness, Ethics, and Evidence*, revisited a long-

standing and historically debated practice in sea turtle conservation, situating it within the broader question of how conservation strategies evolve over time. The session critically examined the biological effectiveness and ethical considerations of headstarting, while also addressing its appropriateness in a modern conservation context. Discussion reflected continued divergence within the field, with some practitioners supporting its use under certain conditions and others questioning its value relative to alternative strategies.

The third plenary, *Surviving to Thriving: Evolving the Ethos of Sea Turtle Conservation*, explored the transition from crisis-driven conservation toward long-term stewardship. As some populations recover while others remain imperilled, the session challenged the field to reassess its assumptions, adapt its strategies, and incorporate a broader range of perspectives into conservation decision-making.

Together, the Opening Ceremony and plenary sessions created a deliberate progression, from grounding in place and values, to critical examination of existing practices, to forward-looking reflection on the future of the field. This structure marked a clear shift in the role of the symposium, from a venue primarily for presenting results to one that more intentionally fostered dialogue, reflection, and direction-setting within the global sea turtle conservation community.

These themes were not confined to the plenary sessions but were further explored through complementary workshops and discussions during the symposium, including sessions addressing decolonisation in conservation practice and the role of sustainable use in contemporary management frameworks. Together, these elements reflected a broader engagement across the programme with evolving and, at times, challenging questions in the field.

INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND FIRSTS

The 44th ISTS Symposium introduced several first-of-their-kind advancements in symposium delivery, communication, and long-term accessibility, fundamentally expanding how the meeting is experienced and accessed.

The symposium marked the first comprehensive effort to record core components of the meeting, including oral presentations, poster sessions, plenaries, and the opening ceremony. A total of 342 (87.9%) of presenters opted in to recording, with only 47 opting out, reflecting strong community support for broader dissemination

of content. This effort extended beyond documentation to significantly expand access and extend the lifespan of the symposium. Recordings create opportunities for participants who were unable to attend specific sessions, as well as for the broader global community, particularly those facing financial, geographic, or logistical barriers to participation. They also establish the foundation for a lasting digital archive, enabling continued learning, reference, and engagement well beyond the meeting itself.

The symposium also marked the first time a dedicated mobile programme application was developed, with 640 installations, representing adoption by the vast majority of attendees. Used alongside the printed programme, the app significantly improved real-time communication, scheduling, and participant engagement, demonstrating the value of integrated digital tools for large international scientific meetings.

The scale of coordination required for the symposium was also substantial, with more than 21,000 system-generated communications supporting registration, scheduling, and participant coordination. Together, these advancements represent a meaningful step toward a more accessible, connected, and resilient model for future ISTS symposia.

PARTICIPATION AND GLOBAL REACH

The symposium attracted 693 participants, representing 53 nations. Participation reflected strong global engagement across regions and sectors.

Attendees included representatives of NGOs, government agencies, and academic institutions. Registration data also reflected the broad diversity of the symposium community, including 128 students, 54 participants from Pacific Island regions, 205 participants from low-income countries, 228 from high-income countries, 34 non-ISTS members, and 44 single-day registrants. These categories highlight important dimensions of participation, though they are not mutually exclusive. Extensive travel support also played an important role in enabling attendance from a diverse and globally distributed community.

A total of 363 participants had no prior recorded attendance since tracking began at the 40th ISTS Symposium, underscoring the meeting's success in expanding its reach to new and previously unrecorded members of the global sea turtle conservation community.

SCIENTIFIC PROGRAMME

The scientific programme was substantial, with 437 abstracts submitted and 1,177 completed reviews conducted by Session Chairs. Following withdrawals prior to the symposium, the final programme included 389 scientific contributions, consisting of 180 oral presentations and 209 poster presentations.

Sessions covered the full breadth of sea turtle science and conservation, including in-water ecology, nesting biology, population monitoring, fisheries interactions, conservation management, and socio-cultural dimensions of conservation. Delivery of the scientific programme was supported by three Programme Chairs, 41 Session Chairs and 118 volunteers, whose contributions were essential to coordinating reviews, managing sessions, and ensuring the smooth execution of the programme.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Student participation continued to be a defining strength of the symposium, spanning both the scientific programme and a range of dedicated engagement activities. A total of 126 students applied for the Archie Carr Student Awards, reflecting strong interest in competitive recognition within the scientific programme. In parallel, 145 student presentations were evaluated through the symposium's student evaluation process, including 83 poster presentations and 62 oral presentations, supported by 129 volunteer evaluators. Because participation in both the awards and evaluation processes was optional, the total number of student contributions to the symposium was likely higher than these figures alone.

Engagement extended beyond the scientific programme through a well-attended suite of student-focused events. The student mixer brought together 69 participants, while 42 students and 5 experts participated in the student workshop. Speed chatting sessions included 19 students and 9 experts, contributing to a total of 14 experts engaged across student programming.

Together, these efforts facilitated meaningful interaction between students and established researchers, supported professional development, and reinforced the symposium's role in cultivating the next generation of sea turtle scientists and conservation practitioners.

WORKSHOPS, REGIONAL MEETINGS, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Workshops and regional meetings held during the first three days of the symposium remained a central component of the programme, providing structured opportunities for training, collaboration, and regional coordination. Nineteen workshops engaged a total of 846 participants, providing opportunities for technical training, skill development, and collaboration. Individual workshops ranged from approximately a dozen to over 90 participants, reflecting both specialised and broadly attended topics. Several workshops also engaged directly with themes highlighted in the plenary programme, extending discussions on topics such as decolonisation in conservation practice and the role of sustainable use into more applied and participatory settings. In addition, six regional meetings brought together 243 participants to discuss region-specific conservation priorities, strengthen networks, and coordinate efforts across geographic areas. Together, these sessions played an important role in building capacity, fostering collaboration, and supporting coordination across the global sea turtle conservation community.

OUTREACH, COMMUNITY EVENTS, AND CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

A diverse suite of community, cultural, and special events complemented the scientific programme and were intentionally integrated into the symposium to reinforce the theme of *Kaiāulu*, fostering connection, place-based engagement, and shared experience.

The Welcome Social and Farewell Luau served as cornerstone events, each integrating cultural elements that grounded the symposium in its Hawai'i setting. The Welcome Social featured traditional Hawaiian music and performances, alongside hula, Tahitian dance, and fire knife dancing, and was attended by approximately 500 participants. The Farewell Luau similarly combined a traditional Hawaiian culinary experience with live local music, drawing more than 440 attendees and providing a meaningful and celebratory close to the symposium.

Additional events supported both community engagement and professional exchange. These included Video Night, which provided a public-facing platform for storytelling and outreach and featured 24 films representing a wide range of countries and perspectives. The Origin Stories session created space for personal narratives from individuals working in sea turtle conservation, highlighting diverse pathways into the

field and the experiences that have shaped practitioners' careers. The IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG) meeting also served as an important forum for global coordination and collaboration.

The Makana Aloha programme offered a mechanism for participants to support the symposium while sharing locally inspired goods, reinforcing the event's connection to place and community. Together, these events extended the impact of the symposium beyond the formal scientific programme, reinforcing its role as both a professional gathering and a vibrant global community.

SPONSORSHIP, PARTNERSHIPS, AND FUNDRAISING

The 44th ISTS Symposium achieved the highest level of financial support and partnership engagement in its history, reflecting an unprecedented level of investment in both the scope and delivery of the meeting. In total, sponsorship and partnership contributions generated approximately \$290,000 in support of the symposium, representing the highest level of financial support in its history.

The symposium was anchored by Wild Earth Allies as Lead Partner, whose support was instrumental in shaping both the scope and ambition of the meeting, including the development of the plenary programme and other key initiatives. Additional major contributions were provided by three Platinum Sponsors, the Coastal Wildlife Club, Oceans and Wildlife Institute, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Further support was provided by the Pacific Cooperative Studies Unit at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa as a Gold Sponsor, alongside a broader base of event-specific and general sponsors whose contributions supported student participation, programme delivery, and community events throughout the week.

The symposium's live and silent auctions were exceptionally successful, generating a combined total of \$39,185, including \$12,161 from the silent auction and \$27,024 from the live auction. This represents a record-breaking outcome for the symposium and reflects a high level of engagement and generosity from the global sea turtle conservation community.

Merchandise sales were also highly successful. Through an in-kind contribution from Free Fly Apparel, sun hoodies were made available for purchase, generating \$15,290 in gross revenue. With production costs of approximately \$5,000, net proceeds of roughly \$10,000 directly supported the symposium. The symposium

also included 18 exhibitors and vendors, including 6 commercial exhibitors and 12 non-profit exhibitors.

Travel grant support remained a major priority, with 180 applications received and 121 grants awarded (67.2% of applicants). Delivering this level of support in Hawai'i required substantial investment, with approximately \$149,000 allocated to support participant accommodations, reflecting both the success of fundraising efforts and the symposium's commitment to accessibility.

Together, these contributions enabled an expanded scope of programming, accessibility, and participant support beyond what has been achieved in previous symposia.

LEGACY AND FORWARD IMPACT

The 44th ISTS Symposium represents a clear inflection point in the evolution of the Society's flagship meeting.

By combining one of the largest scientific programmes to date with strong global representation, expanded accessibility, and a willingness to engage directly with complex and evolving conservation topics, the symposium broadened both the scope and purpose of the meeting.

Together, these elements reinforced the symposium's longstanding role as a platform for sharing research while elevating its function as a space for reflection, dialogue, and direction-setting within the global sea turtle conservation community. The conversations initiated in Hawai'i, particularly those centred on Indigenous leadership, contested conservation practices, and the evolving ethos of conservation, are likely to influence both discourse and practice in the years ahead.

In this way, the 44th ISTS Symposium not only reflected the current state of the field but also contributed to shaping its future trajectory.