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Education center on wheels rolls into Kahaluu

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BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK

WEST HAWAII TODAY

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By the month's end, The Kohala Center plans to have a soft opening of its Kahaluu Bay Education Center -- a 1995 Ford van retrofitted to be an educational tool to share the importance of the resources at the popular West Hawaii snorkeling and surfing spot.

While this new education center is small, The Kohala Center and Hawaii County officials say it will make a big impact in further enhancing the area's natural environment and protecting cultural resources. It will also serve as a focal spot for educational, public outreach and research efforts, as well as a concession stand, renting snorkel gear for about \$9 plus tax.

All profits from the concession will go toward educational programs at Kahaluu and the implementation of the park's master plan, said Bob Fitzgerald, the county Department of Parks and Recreation director.

The plan, completed in 2008, incorporates the community's vision for revitalizing the 4.2 acre area. The long-term vision includes re-orienting vehicle and pedestrian traffic flow; restoring the beach area, fishpond and heiau; and moving a pavilion away from the shoreline.

The Kohala Center has a 10-year contract with the county to establish the education center, designed by Jennifer Bryan of Anoano Design Group. The nonprofit environmental research and education organization has invested \$25,000 so far toward the mobile facility, equipment and display materials, said Matt Hamabata, The Kohala Center's executive director.

The county's contribution consists of supplying a place for the education center, Fitzgerald said.

"We're excited about this partnership ... because we believe this will only enhance the prized resources at Kahaluu Bay that mean so much to all of us and secure them for future generations to enjoy," he added. "This agreement also reduces the impact of concession, which are vital and necessary, but should be kept as low key as possible at this beautiful and sensitive location."

Hamabata called the collaboration "a positive affirmation," showing how the government, residents and visitors can reach their potential.

The mobile center will be open from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily near the park entrance. There visitors can watch videos about reef etiquette, snorkeling basics and the bay itself. There will also be computerized access to information about the bay and ahupuaa, said Cindi Punihaoale, The Kohala Center's community outreach and volunteer coordinator.

The Kohala Center plans to hire staff, but Punihaoale and Hamabata did not know exactly how many employees.

The Kohala Center began its work at Kahaluu five years ago when it helped organize an effort to stop trampling damage to the fragile coral reef environment, used by roughly 350,000 to 400,000 people annually, Hamabata said.

Since then more than 400 volunteers from around the world and three dozen local businesses have mobilized to save the bay from destruction, plan its future, as well as return it to a place of respect, ambiance and beauty. Through successful educational programs, such as ReefTeach and Adopt-A-Day, they have taught thousands of visitors what coral is, how to respectfully encounter the reef and marine life, and minimize their impact. Studies have shown 97 percent of the bay users will not step or stand on coral after interacting one-on-one with ReefTeachers, Punihaoale said.

Punihaoale said Kahaluu is also as "a living laboratory" teaching and research programs, including Citizen

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Science, a water quality program that tests the bay's waters as part of an overall ecosystem health project.

Here in "this sacred, life-giving place," science, culture and education meld, she added.

For more information, contact The Kohala Center at 887-6411 or go to kohalacenter.org.

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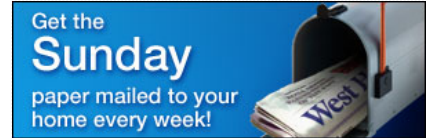
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