

From the water to the web

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BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK | WEST HAWAII TODAY

A new website bursting with dynamic, interactive content has been launched to engage the public in conservation and restoration efforts at Kahaluu Bay.

The Hawaii Institute for Marine Biology and the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Center for Conservation Research and Training have contributed significantly to The Kohala Center Portal, available at portals.intelesense.net/tkc.

Users can find various water, weather and cultural resources, including a baseline assessment of the ocean habitat, watershed and reef health indexes, an inventory of marine species, a map of historical sites, and moolo about Kahaluu and Keauhou. There's also data from The Kohala Center's Citizen Science Program, which regularly collects water quality data at the bay.

The goal of the portal is to bring science and education together to provide site visitors with a better understanding of this critically important resource.

"Data is only data unless it is used by the community," said Kaipō Perez III, a University of Hawaii student who is pursuing a doctorate in zoology and doing his dissertation at Kahaluu Bay.

This sets the foundation for future monitoring, empowers the public to help make changes or decisions in the future, and allows for community-based management, he added.

The public got a glimpse of the portal during a presentation Tuesday evening inside a packed ballroom at the Keauhou Beach Resort. They also listened to kupuna Mitchell Fujisaka's stories of his childhood at Kahaluu, the environmental changes he witnessed, and how he helped noted kahuna Henry Kekahuna map the culturally significant areas along the coastline.

The Kohala Center Portal is part of a three-year project, funded by the National Science Foundation, that provides the cyberinfrastructure required for tracking and understanding the impact of climate change scenarios on water resources in Hawaii and Alaska. It's also part of an objective to develop a "model system" for improving the community's capacity to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts. The project ends in August, but UH plans to ask for a no-cost extension, said Ken Kaneshiro, Center for Conservation Research and Training director.

Perez has been conducting a baseline survey of the water-based resources at Kahaluu Bay. He said more than 200 key features, such as flora and fauna, observations and geographic coordinates have been recorded, placed on an interactive map and uploaded to the portal. Water levels, salinity, temperature, pH (a measure of a solution's acidity) and dissolved oxygen have been tracked. Also available are the distribution of corals in the bay, as well as the types of fish and their prevalence at various sites.

The Kohala Center began its work at Kahaluu about six 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, said Matt Hamabata, The Kohala Center's executive director.

Since then, more than 300 volunteers have mobilized to save the bay from destruction, plan its future, as well as return it to a place of respect, ambiance and beauty. The Kohala Center also opened its Kahaluu Bay Education Center — a van retrofitted to be an educational tool to share the importance of the resources at the popular West Hawaii snorkeling and surfing spot.

Through educational programs like ReefTeach, they have taught thousands of visitors what coral is, how to respectfully encounter the reef and marine life, and minimize their impacts. ReefTeachers interacted one-on-one with roughly 38,000 bay users last year. Studies have shown the majority of

the bay users will not step or stand on coral after interacting with ReefTeachers, Hamabata said.

Hamabata called the portal "a big step forward," one that helps with not only data collection, but also deciding how to make "the right investment" in protecting the area's natural environment and cultural resources.

To log into the portal, enter username: visitor and password: welcome. For more information, call The Kohala Center at 887-6411.

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