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Kohala Center awarded contract to operate education center at Kahalu‘u Bay

KAMUELA, Hawai‘i—December 3, 2011—The Kohala Center has entered into a 10-year contract with the County of Hawai‘i to establish a learning center—the Kahalu‘u Bay Education Center—at Kahalu‘u Beach Park. The Bay Education Center offers a unique visitor education experience—one that teaches respect and reverence for the natural and cultural resources of Kahalu‘u Bay.

The Bay Education Center represents a new model of collaboration between the County and a nonprofit, The Kohala Center. The two entities will work together to enhance the natural environment of Kahalu‘u Bay through educational, public outreach, and research efforts.

“Kahalu‘u Beach Park can and should be host to a visitor center similar to the one at Hanauma Bay, a center which provides outstanding educational experiences and good employment opportunities for local people,” said Cindi Punihaole, Public Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator for The Kohala Center. “Current visitor numbers support the creation of an education center at Kahalu‘u. Local residents, adjoining landowners, and business owners support this project, and the Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce took action to adopt it.”

The Bay Education Center is starting small. A new, portable facility to house the educational center and the snorkel rental concession has been professionally designed by Jennifer Bryan of Anoano Design Group and established on-site. The center provides educational videos and computerized access to environmental and cultural information about Kahalu‘u Bay and the ahupua‘a.

As part of the educational outreach efforts, The Kohala Center will manage a snorkel rental concession through which visitors can learn about how to enjoy the bay and at the same time protect its fragile environment. All profits from this outreach effort will be re-invested in educational programs and in the implementation of the Kahalu‘u Beach Park Master Plan, a conceptual plan which incorporates the community’s vision for revitalization of this area.

“We are excited about this partnership with The Kohala Center and we hope it can be used as a template for similar agreements around our island,” said Hawai‘i County Mayor Billy Kenoi. “Kahalu‘u Bay Education Center will provide the necessary link to remind us of what we already know—that our recreational and natural resources can be enjoyed by our residents and visitors—but these *wahi pana*, or celebrated places, are fragile and it is everyone’s responsibility to help preserve them.”

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New staff will be hired and trained to operate the rental concession and the educational center and to support volunteers. Staff and volunteers will wear distinctive apparel to be readily identified by bay visitors. The rental center and the educational center is open from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day that the park is open.

The Kohala Center will continue its successful ReefTeach and Citizen Science programs, as well as the other outreach, educational, volunteer, and research programs currently underway at Kahalu‘u Bay. Currently, ReefTeach includes over 270 volunteers and three dozen businesses. The Kohala Center also created the ReefTeach “Train-the-Trainer” and “Adopt-a-Day at Kahalu‘u Bay” programs in which more than 30 businesses participate. Both programs educate staff members of businesses and organizations on proper reef etiquette so that they may help by volunteering at Kahalu‘u Bay and by sharing their knowledge with visitors who frequent their establishments.

The Kohala Center staff will also collaborate with the County Director of Parks and Recreation, Bob Fitzgerald, to discuss opportunities for improvements to Kahalu‘u Beach Park and to implement the Kahalu‘u Beach Park Master Plan.

“This is a wonderful educational opportunity that will only enhance Kahalu‘u Bay and its resources,” Fitzgerald said. “We believe this agreement will also reduce the impact of concessions, which are vital and necessary, but should be kept as low key as possible at such a beautiful location,” he said.

The Kohala Center is an independent, not-for-profit center for research and education *about* and *for* the environment. The Kohala Center builds teaching and research programs for energy and food self-reliance as well as ecosystem health. To learn more about The Kohala Center’s programs, visit www.kohalacenter.org. For more information on The Kohala Center’s Kahalu‘u Bay Project, visit <http://www.kohalacenter.org/kahaluubay/about.html>.