

For Immediate Release

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Kahalu‘u preservation, education programs continue

KAMUELA, Hawaii—January 9, 2009—The bright blue ReefTeach T-shirts will continue to be a familiar sight at Kahalu‘u Beach Park this year, thanks in part to a State grant for preservation and marine conservation education programs at the bay.

The Kahalu‘u Bay Project received its third Hawaii Tourism Authority’s (HTA) Natural Resources Program Award for the project’s programs in “marine education, marine resource monitoring, environmental restoration, and community engagement activities that aim to preserve and restore the natural environment and special character of the shoreline and coral reef at Kahalu‘u Bay.”

“The HTA grant goes toward making Kahalu‘u Bay a destination for education about marine conservation that merges Western scientific approaches with Hawaiian cultural wisdom about resource management. Working with the community and local businesses, this creates an innovative model of how to engage residents and visitors together in the preservation of Hawaii’s natural resources,” said Cindi Punihaole, project coordinator.

The Kahalu‘u Bay Project is one of 25 community-based programs sharing this year’s \$2 million in HTA Natural Resources Program funding, which supports efforts to manage, improve, and protect Hawaii’s natural environment and areas frequented by visitors.

The project works to preserve the natural environment at Kahalu‘u Bay, formerly a native Hawaiian fish pond and an important fishing, recreation and cultural site for Hawaii Island residents for hundreds of years. Now a 4.2 acre County beach park, this premier reef encounter site is being overwhelmed by the number of visitors attracted to this swimming and snorkeling site.

Each year more than 400,000 people use Kahalu‘u Bay—nearly twice as many users per water acre as at the more protected Hanauma Bay on Oahu. The coral at Kahalu‘u Bay can be damaged and even killed by human touch and trampling by well-meaning but poorly informed visitors, perhaps encountering a coral reef for the first time in their lives. Many simply cannot tell the difference between living coral and dead rock. As a result, the corals at Kahalu‘u are in danger of disappearing due to potentially high levels of trampling damage.

Six years ago the University of Hawaii Sea Grant Extension Agent in West Hawaii initiated a program of educational presentations at Kahalu‘u Bay by volunteer ReefTeachers. The ReefTeach program was successful, and data collected during and immediately after each teaching session

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revealed that trampling damage caused by bay users standing on living coral was significantly reduced.

ReefTeach was embraced by both community members and local schools as classroom projects. The Girl Scouts even developed a merit badge around this effort. In 2006 The Kohala Center, a privately-funded, independent academic institute for environmental studies, stepped forward to facilitate the continuing community-driven efforts at protecting Kahalu‘u Bay. Since that time, the Center has worked with a wide range of public and private organizations and agencies to protect and restore the Kahalu‘u Bay area.

During 2006, The Kohala Center received funds from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Bishop Holdings, Inc., and HTA Natural Resource Program to support coral reef awareness programs at Kahalu‘u Bay. Bishop Holdings has continued to support the project, and HTA renewed its support in 2008 and again for 2009. The Bay Concert, an annual fundraiser, also celebrates the efforts of residents and businesses to preserve Hawaii’s natural environment.

A Kahalu‘u Advisory Group—made up of community members, scientific and cultural advisors, and visitor industry representatives—was formed to oversee project activities and strategic planning.

“Although the project’s early and continued success is heartening, there is much more to be done to save Kahalu‘u Bay from overuse and to rescue the beach park from disrepair,” Punihaole said.

Programs planned for 2009 and beyond include:

- Planning and implementing the physical improvements guided by the master plan developed during the 2008 community design process to map out the future of Kahalu‘u Beach Park. Long-term plans include re-orienting vehicle and pedestrian traffic flow, removing an old pavilion and retaining wall, restoring the beach area, and building a cultural-educational facility at the park.
- Strengthening and expanding a citizen science water quality monitoring program to systematically sample the waters in the Kahalu‘u Bay-Keauhou area as part of an overall ecosystem health project for the Kahalu‘u and Keauhou *ahupua‘a*.
- Continued expansion of the ReefTeach program so that there are 100 regular volunteers. This will allow daily coverage at Kahalu‘u Beach Park during the peak visitor hours of 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. without unduly straining the capacity of any individual or local business teams.
- Continued educational outreach about coral reef conservation to visitor industry businesses and to the general public, including training of business staff and an expansion of free public talks and events.
- Expansion of a small volunteer ReefWatch program to include regular marine life surveys of the bay to determine whether conservation efforts are succeeding and what threats might be developing that affect the environmental quality in the bay.
- Continued planning and implementation of physical improvements to Kahalu‘u Beach Park as funds and County and State regulations permit.

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- Completion of a study about the feasibility of restoring sand to areas in which it has eroded dramatically by the removal of a rock wall along the bay front.
- Consultation, assistance, and sharing of educational materials with other groups working at oceanfront sites around Hawaii Island and on other islands, as requested.

For more about the Kahalu‘u Bay Project, restoration, the culture and history of the area, ReefTeach and other programs, visit www.kohalacenter.org/kahaluubay/about.

The Kohala Center respectfully engages the Island of Hawaii as a living laboratory for humanity, developing and supporting high-quality teaching and research programs in the environmental, oceanic, and botanical sciences and operating at the intersection of culture, science and community. The Center supports collaborative work that will sustain the Hawaii Island, as well as develop knowledge that will be of value to the world.

The Center is at the hub of a network of private- and public-sector island organizations that open the entire Island of Hawaii as a natural classroom and laboratory. Current island educational partners include among many others the Kamehameha Schools, the Edith Kanaka‘ole Foundation, University of Hawaii at Hilo and Manoa, Hawaii Community College, UH Sea Grant, and Hawaii State Department of Education. The Kohala Center ensures that all teaching and research programs it sponsors are oriented to the spiritual and cultural landscape of island life and that programs benefit the residents of Hawaii.

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Photo captions

(ReefTeach T-shirt)

The bright blue T-shirt worn by ReefTeach volunteer Lynn Webber is a familiar sight at Kahalu‘u Beach Park. ReefTeach and other programs to Save Kahalu‘u are funded in part by a 2009 Hawaii Tourism Authority grant.

(A busy day at Kahalu‘u)

Colorful information boards are part of the ReefTeach marine conservation education program at busy Kahalu‘u Beach Park. ReefTeach and other programs to Save Kahalu‘u are funded in part by a 2009 Hawaii Tourism Authority grant.