



Hawaii Island's Best Beach for Snorkeling

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When I arrived at Hawaii Island's number one snorkeling beach last week, the tide was low, revealing bright green seaweed growing on rocks. Exactly 77 beach-goers were out--reclining on beach towels, wading in the water, swimming and snorkeling. A dozen more sat at the picnic tables under the pavilion. Sean, a one-time public defender from California, manned the lifeguard tower, and two retired school teachers, Ken and Regan, set up shop for [ReefTeach](#).

On the back of Ken's blue, volunteer-issue ReefTeach shirt, he'd handwritten in permanent marker: Please Kookua: No Touch Turtles!! No feed fish!! No touch coral!! *Mahalo*.

Kahalu'u Bay is four-and-a-half acres in size. Some 400,000 visitors flock to this beach each year primarily for one thing: to snorkel.

There are only three species of coral in the shallow bay and yet more than 100 species of reef fish have been identified here. That disparity indicates the fish are finding their nutrients in places other than just the reef--most likely delivered in the freshwater seeping through the sieve of an ocean floor, a bed of volcanic rock.

As I read some of the table-top posters on display, a man approached Ken and Regan. He said that in 20 years of visiting and snorkeling Kahalu'u Bay he'd experienced something for the first time the day before. A humuhumunukunukuapua'a--Hawaii's state fish, a Picasso triggerfish--had swum up to him and bit him in the knee. He lifted his leg to prove it. We leaned in close to see it. It was really nothing more than a nibble, but the man was delighted with the new experience, a fish tale to take home. The volunteers explained that the fish was nesting and exhibiting proper territorial behavior.

In relatively recent years, as the population of *Chelonia mydas* has rebounded throughout Hawaii, there is now a second reason why folks make Kahalu'u a destination: Green sea turtles.

There are 24 to 30 regular sea turtles that nibble on the seaweed at high tide, including Blondie, Bolt, and Lefty. Rocky, in particular, likes to haul out on the rocks and bask in the sun for hours.

ReefTeach is a volunteer-based project at Kahalu'u Bay and aimed at educating visitors on how to avoid damaging corals and how to practice safe and respectful wildlife viewing habits, especially when it comes to the turtles frequenting the bay.

There are five main points the program tries to communicate, three of which are succinctly written on the back of Ken's shirt:

1. Do not touch or stand on the coral.
2. Do not feed the fish.
3. Do not disturb the turtles. Try to stay 20 feet away.
4. Wait 15 minutes or more after applying sunscreen before entering the water.
5. Throw away your trash.

Data shows that education works. The efforts of the ReefTeachers pays off. While 80% of those visitors not taught by ReefTeach will step on coral, some for as long as 300 seconds; only 9% of those taught by ReefTeach will do so.

But why is it such a big deal to protect the coral? First, coral reefs have proven to be good indicators for climate change. Second, coral provides shelter and food to an abundant species of marine life. Coral protects beaches from erosion. And scientists are discovering ways in which coral reefs and/or their inhabitants provide medical benefits to human health.

Corals are soft-bodied animals related to sea anemones and jellyfish. Each coral mound that you see while snorkeling is actually made up of thousands of individual coral polyps connected by a thin layer of tissue. As they grow, they secrete a substance that hardens and forms a rigid outer layer—the siding of the large condominium complex in which they live, you might say.

Coral is slow-growing and easily damaged. The coral reef of Hawaii provides a home to an estimated 5,000 animal species, approximately 25% of which are not found anywhere else in the world. Without the reef, there would be no reef fish. No reason to snorkel.

ReefTeach volunteers are not trained to teach people how to snorkel or even to suggest the best place to see marine life at Kahalu'u. But they are happy to help snorkelers identify exactly what they're seeing under water.

As I stood chatting with Ken and Regan, two women approached, one from Missouri and the other from Florida. They had seen an unusual fish a few days before while snorkeling off Poipu on Kauai. The fish had two long, trailing pennants. Moorish idol? No, it was transparent, they said, not striped in black and yellow. Regan flipped through a guide to Hawaii's reef fish. And, there it was, a juvenile Threadfin jack.

The ReefTeach program in 2000 by University of Hawaii Sea Grant. Since 2006, it has been managed by [The Kohala Center](#) and a team of 200-strong volunteers like Ken and Regan. Volunteers can be found at the bay Sundays through Friday, from 10:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m.