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Volunteers restoring Waikuaaala

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BY CHELSEA JENSEN | WEST HAWAII TODAY

Long overgrown with non-native plants, the Waikuaaala pond at Kahaluu Beach Park is regaining its stature.

Work to restore the brackish water pond, located near the center of the park, began shortly after a March 11 tsunami inundated the area.

Since then, numerous people and groups, including a few county workers, have spent hours clearing out weeds, trees and rocks in an effort to expand the pond from the small 12-foot-by-12-foot circle it had become to a nearly 25-by-40 oval.

On Saturday, dozens converged to lend a hand with the pond and other needs at the county park during a community Kokua Kahaluu day.

"This natural disaster created an opportunity to get something back to how it used to be," said Michael Coe, a Canadian resident who has visited the island annually for the past 20 years. "We have got to bring this back to the way it was and it's well on its way."

Coe was just one of dozens of volunteers who helped rebuild the pond's original rock wall, which had been constructed in the mid-1900s but had since been covered by sand. Volunteers also painted pavilions, railings and lifeguard towers during the event collaborated by The Kohala Center, Rotary Club of Kona and the Hawaii County Department of Parks and Recreation.

With just one park worker responsible for seven county recreation sites in the area, doing such a revamp would be difficult without the community's help, said Ronald Sakata, the Department of Parks and Recreation's North and South Kona District supervisor. All supplies, including paint, rust inhibitor, brushes and gloves were provided by the department, he added.

"A lot of the county's facilities need work but we just don't have the manpower because we are working an hour here and an hour there at each site," he said. "This place needs a lot of TLC."

Kelii Freitas, a county worker who spent Saturday showing volunteers how to construct the pond's rock wall, grew up in the area and has fond memories of the ancient bathing pond.

He has also been working on the pond -- when he's able to find time -- since about four days after the tsunami.

"I still get goose bumps every time I come in here," he said during an interview on March 28 while searching in knee high, murky water for the pond's original rock wall, hidden beneath sand, rock and roots. "We are here to restore Waikuaaala to what it used to be."

For Janet Murray, a Kona resident who sometimes uses the beach, giving back and learning a new skill gave her good reason to volunteer for the day, despite already having a bad sunburn.

"That's why I'm here, because I use this park," she said while sorting through smaller rocks used to stabilize the pond's under-construction rock wall. "Everybody should help and everybody should do something. We always need to put love back into the aina."

While Murray and more than a dozen people worked on the pond, many others helped paint, with some having to wait turns to lend a hand. Lifeguards waited on the beach while nearly a dozen people put a coat of bright orange paint on the park's southern lifeguard tower.

"This is just wonderful, you actually have to fight for a job here," said Connie Monell, a Kailua-Kona resident who uses the beach daily. "It's also good because it makes people realize they have a debt to the community and how important it is to help."

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