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Protecting Kahaluu Bay

Interpretive signs attempt to create awareness, provoke action

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A delicate balancing act is afoot to protect the resources at Kahaluu Bay while trying to bring people closer to the wildlife and appreciate the sacredness of this place.

Since January, county Department of Parks and Recreation, The Kohala Center, University of Hawaii Sea Grant College Program and Kahaluu Bay Project Advisory Group have worked diligently on several proposed recommendations relating to the restoration of Kahaluu Beach Park and the transformation of the main pavilion into an education center. The latest addition, new interpretive signage, is now being installed. Officials are hopeful that the signs will create awareness and provoke action.

Tuesday afternoon, several curious onlookers were drawn to the colorful display that provided information on marine life, water safety tips, rules and ways to protect the reef.

"The sign is very informative. Standing on shore, you have no idea what's in the bay," said Laurie Taty, a British Columbia resident who was using the panel to compare what fish she had missed and seen while snorkeling. "This gives people knowledge that is helpful before and after going in the water. It is a good first step to educating the public and protecting the bay."

ReefTeachers -- trained volunteers that teach the public how to identify and avoid touching live coral in the bay -- already assist visitors four days a week. However, the signs make information readily available, as well as "enhances and confirms the knowledge provided by the ReefTeach program." The previous signage, produced by The Kona Reefers Dive Club, was faded and unreadable, said Cindi Punihaole Kennedy, The Kohala Center's outreach and volunteer coordinator.

Kahaluu resident Lorne Ellis agreed the previous signs were "old, dull and drab." He was pleased to see new signage that was "100 percent better, attractive, colorful and more detailed" installed. Ellis thinks people will be more apt to read the signs, which may "spark a dialogue or conservation efforts."

"We need more community efforts like this," he said. "Tourists are not going to care unless the community is involved, participating and actively trying to make an impact."

Richard Duggan of Dare Design spent about seven months designing Kahaluu's four panels, which should last about 10 years in the corrosive climate. This well-known artist created the interpretive signage for the education center at Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve and several Bishop Museum exhibits. Kapa Maly, an independent cultural historian and resource specialist, wrote the panel that interprets the cultural sites and their importance.

"This is the first steps toward a great day at Kahaluu," Duggan said. "The goal is to empower the people to protect the reef and be better visitors. We want them to feel like they had a meaningful experience with low impact."

When asked if interpretive signage is effective, Duggan responded, "I know for a fact that it is." He recalled a conversation he had a month ago with Alan Hong, Hanauma Bay manager.

While at the preserve, Hong asked Duggan what he saw in the distance. Duggan replied the bay. Hong told him to look closer. Out of the 500 people snorkeling and swimming in the state's first Marine Life Conservation District that day, only one person was standing on the reef -- something Duggan considers a success.

"It was a staggering difference like light and day, especially when considering what Hanauma Bay was like prior to become a preserve. Like Kahaluu, there were problems with overcrowdedness, coral trampling and environmental disregard," he said. "I really think this place (Kahaluu) should be a MLCD. In January, I was appalled to see inshore coral, which took thousands of years to develop, destroyed. The signs are the best we can do for now. We can't stop people from coming here, but we can inspire them to make an investment into the community and the ecosystem."



Richard Duggan bolts a coral reef awareness sign into the concrete Tuesday at Kahaluu Beach Park.
 - Photo By Michael Darden | West Hawaii Today