

Posted on: Sunday, July 1, 2007

Stewards of Oahu marine preserve vigilant

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By [Suzanne Roig](#)
Advertiser East Honolulu Writer

HAWAII KAI — Long lines at the cashier's office, limited parking and a lengthy wait to see a mandatory educational video may seem like administrative humbug, but for those who guard the delicate beauty of Hanauma Bay, they create a necessary balance between man and nature.

The restrictions are part of the stewardship of the bay that next month will mark the 40th anniversary of its designation as the state's first Marine Life Conservation District. As such, people were prohibited from fishing or removing any marine life from the horseshoe-shaped bay.

The move was bold at the time and stirred controversy from those complaining that they could no longer fish, skin-dive, use spear guns or throw nets, use crowbars or hammers to remove coral, or go squidding.

"It was a big step in managing a water resource," said Alan Hong, Hanauma Bay park manager. "People would crowbar out coral heads and sell them on the side of the road. Those were the times then."

Since the creation of the marine district, the state and the city have continued to impose even more restrictions on the bay to make it what it is today — a highly regulated tourist destination where visitors are taught not to step on the reef, take fish from the bay, smoke on the beach, drive their car to the beachfront or feed the fish.

Before any of these restrictions were imposed, nearly 3 million visitors flocked to its shores, feeding fish with bread and peas, handling the sea turtles, camping overnight and walking on the coral reefs. Then, roughly 49 percent of the daily visitors stood up on the coral reef, Hong said.

Bread pieces floated up on shore. Visitors reported being bitten by aggressive fish. A sheen of sunscreen floated on top of the water.

Seventeen years later, proof that the Hanauma Bay management plan is working is in the water — reefs show signs of regenerating along its sides, and more than 200 varieties of marine animals can be seen in the clear ocean waters.

And today, less than 3 percent of the visitors stand on the reef.

The management and, later, the educational component organized by the University of Hawai'i Sea Grant College Program led to restrictions of tour buses, with just 80 companies allowed to bring in visitors, who are not allowed to go down to the beach, but only stop and enjoy the view.

And evening events are held to encourage residents to enjoy the nature preserve, opening twice a month on Saturdays for evening swims and offering educational workshops at the education center.

"It's all about balance," Hong said. "It was becoming more like a water park or theme park than a nature preserve. It's supposed to be a nature preserve, and we want it to be as natural as possible."

Along the way, the preserve's financial picture became complicated when the city in 2004 threatened to divert money raised at Hanauma Bay to balance the city budget. The move was highly criticized by bay proponents, who said the money was needed to meet the needs of the preserve.

Eventually, the city decided against the move. A city audit of the Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve Fund



Though some visitors to Hanauma Bay still stand on the coral reef — a prohibited activity — far fewer are doing so these days thanks to various restrictions and educational programs.

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HANAUMA HISTORY

Here are some highlights of the area's history:

1928: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Estate transfers to the city the deeds for Hanauma Bay and Koko Head District Park, as well as Koko Crater and the Botanical Gardens.

1956: A 200-foot-wide channel is dynamited through the center of the bay, blasting through the reef to accommodate the first transpacific telephone cable from Hawai'i to California.

1961: Elvis Presley films "Blue Hawai'i" at Hanauma Bay.

1967: Bay is designated as

released last week stated money flowing in and out of the fund is properly tracked and monitored, but officials should better plan for future spending.

The departments of Parks and Recreation, and Budget and Fiscal Services "are doing a commendable job of accounting for revenues," the audit found.

But the preserve's master plan "is outdated and ineffective as a guide," according to the report. "The budgeting process for the preserve fails to evaluate the preserve funds' projected ability to fund future operational needs."

To see the report, go to www.honolulu.gov/council/auditor/reports.htm.

Elizabeth Kumabe, an environmental education extension agent with the Hanauma Bay Education Program, said teaching ocean etiquette is key to the survival of many ocean areas in Hawai'i.

"What people learn here, they take with them to other areas," Kumabe said. "People want their visit to Hanauma Bay to be as natural as possible."

Restrictions are never enough, Kumabe said, but adding docents trained in the ways of the pristine waters of Hanauma Bay and trained to help identify species of fish helps impart a deeper level of understanding to visitors and residents, she said.

Each year, about 140 volunteers sign up to become docents with the Friends of Hanauma Bay, and about 100 act as the core volunteers, aiding visitors and training people on the ways of the bay. The educational component has become a model for other areas in Hawai'i that need protection from overuse, Ku-mabe said.

Volunteers are required to spend 16 hours in training before they can help in the education program, she said.

The restrictions saved the bay from near extinction, said Robin Bond, a former president of the Friends of Hanauma Bay.

"It would have been overrun by users, loved to death and probably be in terrible condition as far as the environment is concerned," Bond said. "We needed to step forward and manage the bay, manage the environment."

Jeff Morrison, a New Hampshire visitor, stopped at the bay recently with his family. He found the bay to be teeming with fish and marine life.

While the lines were long to pay and the wait to view the educational video was hot, it was all worth it to snorkel among the fish and see the coral, Morrison said.

"The last time I was here, I could see people were trashing the place, and now it's all nice and clean and pristine," he said. "It's absolutely beautiful."

Reach Suzanne Roig at sroig@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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Hawai'i's first Marine Life Conservation District, prohibiting fishing and collecting of fish. The designation was deemed necessary after the bay was considered "fished out."

1977: Visitors reach 1.2 million annually. Sixty-eight percent are residents.

1979: Bay is closed to vehicular traffic and a tram begins to operate between the parking lot and the beach.

1988: Visitors reach 3 million annually, about 10,000 per day. Fewer than 30 percent are residents.

1990: City Council enacts regulations restricting feeding of fish and closing the bay for a half day for maintenance; the Friends of Hanauma Bay forms. The UH Sea Grant Extension Service begins the Hanauma Bay Education Program.

2002: The Hanauma Bay Marine Education Center opens at a cost of \$16.2 million. In addition to an entrance fee, every visitor to the beach is required to view a video on beach etiquette.

BY THE NUMBERS

Annual visitors to Hanauma Bay:

Total arrivals	Year
2.8 million	1990
1.6 million	2000
1.5 million	2001
1.7 million	2002
1.9 million	2003
1.7 million	2004
1.6 million	2005

Source: Hawai'i State Data Book,
state Department of Business
Economic Development and Tourism