

Environment

Restoring Kawainui Marsh After Years Of Neglect Is Not As Easy As It Could Be

Lots of different groups want to restore and protect the iconic Oahu wetland. They just can't agree on how best to do it.



By Blaze Lovell   / November 19, 2019

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A thousand years ago, Kawainui Marsh was nearly 900 acres of mostly open water that was home to Oahu's second largest fish pond, all maintained by Native Hawaiians on the Windward Coast.

An ancient Hawaiian story warns that if the area is not cared for, the waters will turn to land. Now, despite the best efforts by Native Hawaiian organizations, environmental groups and the state over the past seven decades, the story is coming true.

“If we don’t take care of the land, the land will not take care of us,” says Lehuakona Isaacs, a cultural practitioner who has worked in Kawainui for years.

Finding consensus on the best way to move forward and reverse the damage done to Kawainui from years of neglect has not been easy, and controversy over the wetlands was reignited again by a recent [decision by the Board of Land and Natural Resources](#) to approve a long-awaited environmental impact statement for a master plan that shows sites for new cultural and educational centers along with reforestation efforts.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Kawainui Marsh, overgrown with grass and trees, was once a thriving fish pond. The state as

well as local Native Hawaiian organizations have plans to restore it.

Many Native Hawaiian groups in Kailua support [plans in the EIS](#) that allow for three cultural and educational centers around the marsh, but several environmental groups have opposed the idea, saying that any buildings and the increase in traffic that could come along with them could strain the already fragile ecosystem.

Just one of those buildings, located in Pohakea along Kapaa Quarry Road, would be open to the public. The other two would be managed by area nonprofits to run cultural and educational programs.

Some of those environmental groups want the wetlands restored before any talk of building happens, but the Hawaiian organizations say they need those facilities in place to begin restoring the land.

“It didn’t seem logical or prudent, that while you’re restoring something so degraded, that needs so much work, that you invite things that have the potential to have an adverse impact while you’re trying to restore,” Donna Wong, executive director of Hawaii’s Thousand Friends, said.

The state envisions those nonprofits that already care for Kawainui will take the lead on planning its future and developing the centers.

“The department is stretched so thin. Someone else needs to take initiative on it,” said David Smith, administrator for the DLNR Division of Forestry and Wildlife.

There’s no solid plans for any new buildings or trails yet. They all depend on either the state or nonprofits securing funding and then getting plans approved by the state land board, a process that could take years.

For Isaacs, who has worked years volunteering in Kawainui, it’s about setting up a home base that can support restoration efforts.

“There was a break in time when we became disconnected from this place,” he said. “We’ve always had structures and trails there. We aren’t asking for anything new.”

Some ‘No-Give-Up Folks’

Ulupo Heiau rises 30 feet above loi patches and areas where ohia and kukui nut grow. The area fronting the agricultural heiau hosts towering palm trees and ulu along a path leading to a clearing in the tree canopy that overlooks the waters which once held an abundance of fish.

But it wasn’t always well maintained.

Kaleomanuiwa Wong recalls coming to the heiau in the late 1990s while still in high school and seeing the area overgrown with banana trees.

Wong has worked for Hikaalani, one of the nonprofits that work in Kawainui, leading efforts to revitalize the area surrounding Ulupo Heiau since 2015. He’s also a Hokulea crew member who now hosts community workdays for group of students and neighbors in the area with the help of the Windward YMCA.

Kaleomanuiwa Wong, the caretaker of Ulupo Heiau since 2015, leads groups of students each week to work in the area surrounding the heiau.

“Eventually, we want to see the heiau rebuilt. We want to see fish in the fish pond. But that’s kind of secondary with what we’re trying to do to facilitate learning and connections between people and this aina,” he said. “Those other things will happen if we build those connections first.”

On a recent Saturday, a group of about 60 or so high school and university students spent the morning clearing invasive weeds and moving mulch to patches being prepared to plant native species.

That size crowd is common, and the constant presence of volunteers and staffers like Wong has helped the area look more like it did when Native Hawaiians cared for it hundreds of years ago.

Wong said the lack of facilities around Kawainui is a challenge.

“How then does our community come to access these places, to learn and connect if there’s no place for them to even get off the bus, use the bathroom or rinse off?” he said.

Getting adequate resources and volunteers has also been a problem at another sacred site in Kawainui.

Isaacs, president of the nonprofit Ahahui Malama I Ka Lokahi has worked to take care of areas around Kawainui for decades, including Ulupo Heiau and Na Pohaku O Hauwahine, a site Hawaiian legends say was a favorite hangout spot of the Kawainui guardian spirit.

“This is generational work. I’m a silver-haired guy. When I started I probably had one silver hair on my head. There’s some of us no-give-up folks,” Isaacs said.

Lehuakona Isaacs has worked for years to restore parts of Na Pohaku O Hauwahine along Kapaa Quarry Road.

He wants the volunteers to think more about defending native plants from the invasives as opposed to simply performing yard work. Getting people to yank weeds isn't always as attractive as working to restore a fish pond or work in the loi patches, Isaacs said.

Having a facility in nearby Pohakea could help with the efforts to restore Na Pohaku O Hauwahine.

A conceptual plan in the EIS shows an education center open to the

general public with a complex of small structures just off to the side. The total building footprint would be about 10,900 square feet. Hikaalani has plans for another center just across the water at a site called Waiauaia located just before the intersection of Kailua Road and Hamakua Drive.

The EIS allows for a 7,000-square-foot building, and the [Hikaalani website](#) describes a center where hula, traditional and contemporary arts and native customs and rituals can all be practiced. The nonprofit plans to focus on planning for the center while Wong continues caring for Ulupo.

There's a small clearing in the marsh downhill from Ulupo Heiau where Wong said he will try in the next several years to raise fish, see if they are safe to eat, and if so, possibly expand the pond to raise more fish.

Some ponds on the mauka end of Kawainui Marsh near Adventist Health Castle have been restored.

Hikaalani has used the story of the Makalei branch to guide the group's work. In the story, chiefs in charge of organizing an effort to clear Kawainui of invasive plants feed everyone at the end of the day but overlook one boy.

That story holds an important lesson for Wong and his crew: to care for the land as well as the people caring for it. The story also warns that if the land is not cared for, it will turn to aina paa, or solid land.

A peat mass about 4 feet deep floats across much of Kawainui, and Egyptian papyrus has also been spotted. Trees have begun to take root and are spreading.

Whatever the plan, Wong says he'll need the community's help.

"We don't want to, and we can't, do it by ourselves. We want it to be what the community wants," he said.

Worried About Development

While most in the community can agree that Kawainui must be restored, there's disagreement over how best to do it.

The Lani-Kailua Outdoor Circle has been politically active in defending Kawainui from development since the 1950s. It's halted the development of residential complexes, malls, dumps, highways and parks that all threatened to cut through the marsh.

In 1951, it even took part in clearing brush from around Ulupo.

Diane Harding, the Lani-Kailua branch president, recalls growing up in nearby Kaneohe and seeing the marsh on her way to school. At the time, residents called it a swamp.

"In those days, people weren't thinking of the historical aspects of the marsh or even its importance as part of the watershed," Harding said.

"There were cows there. No one gave much thought to the significance of it."

Diane Harding from the Outdoor Circle stands along the Kawainui Marsh. Her group has been defending the marsh from development for decades.

Hawaiians once resided near the marsh, but shifts in the land divisions during the Great Mahele in 1848 — when King Kamehameha III divided Hawaii's lands between groups — and Honolulu becoming an economic center drove many away. Over the years, it was used for rice crops and part of Harold Castle's ranching operations, which introduced scores of invasive plants to feed the herds.

That swamp has been home to several endangered water birds which

have had to share their homes with sewage, abandoned cars, trash and runoff that have all ended up in the marsh over the years.

Harding and others who oppose the plan worry that an increase in activity brought on by the proposed cultural centers and trail improvements in the area could have a detrimental effect on the wildlife. The Lani-Kailua Outdoor Circle suggested smaller buildings, but DOFAW wrote in response that, while many of the proposals were consistent with the plan's objectives, facilities were inadequate to accomplish the cultural goals of the master plan.

"We understand it's for cultural practices," Harding said. "We don't disagree with that, and we support that activity. We're just concerned with the scale."

Lani-Kailua Outdoor Circle's plan suggests more traditional, thatched-roof style buildings that are open air.

"We believe an outdoor classroom is better to teach outdoor classes," Harding said. "We don't need hardscapes. We want less impactful structures."

Lani-Kailua runs several preservation and beautification projects around Kailua. In Kawainui, the group has helped to clear brush and manages a community service program with the women's prison.

Harding said that much of the Outdoor Circle's time at Kaiwainui in the past few years has gone to putting together its alternate plan and tracking the EIS.

Some of the concerns, also shared by several other community groups in Kailua, include potential runoff or sewer leaks and disturbing the native birds.

There are several species of endangered native birds that DLNR identified in the EIS including the Hawaiian stilt, moorhen, coot and duck.

PF Bentley/Civil Beat

The endangered ae'o or Hawaiian stilt birds make their home at Kawainui Marsh in Kailua.

Some of the buildings along Kapaa Quarry Road are sited in an area of Kawainui near bird nesting areas, though the EIS would restrict building during nesting seasons and prohibit getting too close to the nests.

Kawainui already has a levee built in 1997 that runs from Kaha park on the Kalaheo side of Kawainui to an area near Waiauia. The levee often gets

foot traffic from joggers who share the path with ducks and some of the endangered bird species.

The plan calls for another 2.7 miles of trails around the marsh.

An estimated 3,100 people currently visit the marsh each month; that number could jump to about 9,000, according to the EIS. That figure has worried many Kailua residents, picturing even more cars and pedestrians in the already crowded seaside town turned tourist destination.

Smith, the DOFAW manager, doesn't think it will be much of an attraction.

"I don't think the marsh is really going to be a draw," he said. "The main thrust of the plan and I think the main usage for the area is educational and opportunities for local folks to get involved in environmental restoration work and local people getting out for recreation."

Culture Woven In Planning

The state began the master plan for Kawainui in the 1980s and passed the last plan in 1992. But this is the first time Native Hawaiians have been included in that process.

"The cultural groups were not consulted as much, in as early a stage, as they were in this plan," Smith said.

Isaacs said DLNR first involved the various Native Hawaiian organizations about 10 years ago.

"They listened, really listened and saw the value of our cultural practice. You have their ear. They come to talk story in the forest," he said. "That's the relationship that has evolved. It was never an attitude of 'we know better than you.' They listened. That's an important thing that they did

right.”

Many elements from the plan are not new. While the cultural aspect of the three education centers around the marsh are new to this plan, Smith said previous plans included buildings and trails.

Screenshot from DLNR

The Division of Forestry and Wildlife consulted with Native Hawaiian organizations to develop the master plan.

But neither of those have gotten funding in the past. Smith, who has been employed 30 years with the state, said it’s unlikely DLNR will fund the projects. If anything, the state parks division might be able to fund the

trails.

Smith said the state won't build anything like more trails, roads or lookouts unless it has the resources to maintain them. And none of the nonprofits involved with the care of Kawainui will be able to get their proposals approved by the state land board without demonstrating they have sufficient funds and are organized enough to maintain the centers.

They also need to demonstrate clear plans for what the centers and surrounding areas will look like as well as how their programs will be run.

Smith hopes that having the nonprofits go through the state bidding process and having their plans vetted by the land board and community will ease many of the concerns with the current EIS. That way, the community has more chances to weigh in on specific aspects of the plans.

"I think that could give people more comfort with the process, that it's not just one big one-and-done thing," Smith said. "That should be an approach more agreeable for the community."

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Viewing Options 

trin_trinn99 2 weeks ago

Wetlands such as Kawainui are crucial natural resources. Kawainui needs to be restored not only because it holds cultural significance and that it's home to many native and endangered species, but the wetland also offers a variety of valuable services. Such valuable services would include filtering out nutrients and other contaminants from run-off, it reduces the risk of floods, helps to lower flood-water levels, and they also serve as natural reservoirs. If sewage, abandoned cars, trash and runoff that have all ended up in the marsh over the years can be cleared out and controlled I believe that Kawainui could be restored with the efforts made by