

Civic Engagement—Picking a Fight

Dana Naone Hall

In the aftermath of 9/11, Hawai‘i’s economy, so reliant on tourism, was devastated. Voices were heard calling for a new, more diversified economy, but not much has changed since then. If anything, Hawai‘i has become more dependent on tourism in the past decade.

The latest crisis, a global pandemic, is spurring some new thinking around the concept of *‘āina aloha* and Hawai‘i core values. My feeling is that we also need to take stronger, immediate action to protect our islands and preserve our natural and cultural resources, even while we work to bring others into the discussion. Curbing the excesses of too many visitors is essential to the well-being of the place and its people.

When I first moved to Maui in the late 70s, tourists mainly hung around the Kā’anapali Resort on the west side, or Maui’s newly developing south shore at Wailea. One could drive on East Maui roads at night and not pass another car in a ten-mile stretch. Fast forward forty years, and it is a common occurrence to have to wait at stop signs before joining a long line of cars traveling toward Pā‘ia at all hours, many coming from a day trip to Hāna. One of the measures instituted to protect Hāna’s people from the virus was to set up check points near Twin Falls and at ‘Ulupalakua to allow traffic by Hāna residents only. Hāna stayed safe, and traffic decreased exponentially. Some longtime residents commented that it was like Hāna fifty years ago.

One of the visible signs that tourists were off the roads was the acres of cars, some 18,000 plus vehicles, parked in empty fields surrounding Kahului Airport. After a while, grass could be seen growing up around them. It struck me then that our physical infrastructure is adequate for our resident population, but not for all the tourists.

Speaking of the spread of coronavirus, imagine how much worse it might have been if Hawai‘i had five international airports, as was so ardently sought in the 90s. Flights from Asia or Europe (through connecting flights) landing at Lihū‘e, Honolulu, Kahului, Kona, and Hilo. Citizens fought hard to avert this fate. This is a prime example of the dedication and resistance necessary to protect Hawai‘i.

Legions of tourists aren’t the only problem. The Honolulu Rail debacle, overdue and wildly over budget, is now projected to open sometime in 2026 with the

completion of the last rail station at Ala Moana. Spin-off projects, like the recently announced plan by the Canadian corporation that owns Ala Moana Center to construct a 400-foot residential tower at one end of the Center as soon as next year, only add more density to an already dense urbanscape. And—if these timelines bear any relationship to reality—what about the approximately five-year gap between the completion of the tower and the Rail coming on line? If anything, the 400-foot tower is premature and ripe for a challenge.

Honokahua Mau a Mau

I was asked recently to be interviewed for a Cultural Impact Assessment on a “Cultural and Lifestyle Enhancement” project at the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua, which is adjacent to the Honokahua Burial Site. A Zoom meeting was arranged at which a PowerPoint presentation was provided. I did not participate, in large part because my request for information on the project had not been fulfilled. My preferred starting point for evaluating any project is an independent examination of relevant project documents and fact-finding. This approach is better than relying on the sales abilities of project consultants.

Protection of the Honokahua Burial Site is assured by the Honokahua Burial Site Agreement and a Preservation and Conservation Easement—both executed in 1989. The landowner, Maui Land & Pineapple Company, received 5.5 million dollars in exchange for granting the development rights to the 13.6-acre parcel to the State of Hawai‘i in perpetuity. Another primary benefit of the Honokahua controversy was the enactment of Hawai‘i’s burial law, HRS 6E-43, protecting unmarked burial sites fifty years old and older.

The problem more than thirty years later is a lack of fidelity to the original—and still operative—governing documents. For instance, the Preservation and Conservation Easement contains unequivocal language that “no buildings or structures shall be erected or placed on the Premises hereafter” About two weeks after I first requested documents from Kapalua, I received some 11” x 17” graphics of concept plans. On one sheet I noticed that according to a legend on the page, a dashed line was identified as the “Line of conservation boundary.” This boundary line is shown crossing over a sport (tennis) court—a clear violation of the easement. There are other violations as well, but the good news is that the current project presents the possibility to reestablish the boundaries of the 13.6-acre site.

There are other issues with the project that need addressing. For instance, the proximity of a proposed new pool and water slide area directly upslope of the burial site. I am concerned that swimming and water play activities as well as sunbathing on chaise lounges may be incompatible with the peace and sanctity of a burial site.

This situation has revealed the truth that knowledge and vigilance are necessary to protect sites that were intended to be preserved and conserved for all time.

Establishing a National Archive

With the Honokahua Burial Site as a prime example of how memories, and thereby intentions, can wane, now may be the time to establish an archive for Lāhui Hawai‘i, perhaps at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge. Those of us with direct knowledge of seminal events in contemporary Hawai‘i history can contribute interviews and salient documents on issues from Waiāhole-Waikāne to Kalama Valley and Kaho‘olawe, from East Maui Water struggles to Kawaiaha‘o and Mauna Kea, as well as a myriad of other issues. This effort would further distinguish UH Mānoa’s status as a Research 1 institution, with the only college of indigenous studies in the United States.

The torch from Hawai‘i’s past burns brightly to illuminate the present that we step through to the future we are making.

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