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Environmental Center

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HB 1248

RELATING TO NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

House Committee on Energy and Environmental Protection

Public Hearing, February 8, 1999

8:30 a.m., Room 312, State Capitol

By

John Harrison, Environmental Center

Jacquelin Miller, Environmental Center

Peter Rappa, Sea Grant

HB 1248 would provide for creation of the Hawaii environmental authority to oversee the state's environmental protection policies.

Our comments on this measure are compiled from voluntarily submitted opinions of the listed academic sources, and as such, do not constitute an institutional position of the University of Hawaii.

The great irony that this measure underscores is that the state has allocated more to market its visitor industry than it has to manage the very resources that attract our visitors. That said, the measure takes cues from the mandate to the Tourism Authority and addresses the long-standing and widely recognized need for oversight and coordination of the multiple facets of natural resource management. A similar oversight authority was suggested in the Environmental Center's 1991 report on the State EIS system. The major structural difference was that we suggested that the authority (which we called the Environmental Commission) should be an executive level advisory body in order to facilitate interagency coordination of environmental management practices.

A key feature of this proposed measure is the allocation of revenues from the transient accommodations tax (TAT) to the purposes of environmental management. Noting the willingness of visitors to protect Hawaii's environment, this seems a well-justified assignment of these revenues. We note that last years' statistics indicated that tourism volume grew on all of the outer islands, yet shrank on Oahu. It seems that the experiences our visitors seek are embodied in expansive open spaces, clear waters, and the awe-inspiring natural landscapes of our islands, in preference to concrete and congestion. Protecting those land and seascapes and the quality of life of our people should be a funding priority, but sadly, Hawaii ranks among the lowest states in the country in proportional expenditures for natural resource management.