The economic value generated by Maunalua Bay is not well understood, but greatly needed. This basic monetary value is essential in understanding how the bay supports the livelihoods of business owners and their employees in the community and across the island. To better assess this figure, we developed a survey specifically for recreational, commercial businesses who operate within Maunalua Bay. However, the majority of businesses declined to participate due to the survey approach, survey format, and/or existing tension with associated community conservation groups. The initial project goal to understand the economic value of Maunalua Bay to recreational, commercial operating
businesses was not achieved due to an extremely low response rate. The data collected from completed surveys are not included in the report, as it is not a complete representation of the community we hoped to engage. Instead, we intend to better understand and improve how students connect with commercial operators in Maunalua Bay and inform future valuation efforts by offering these recommendations:

1. Understand the historic and current relationship between businesses and conservation community groups
2. Develop that relationship through one-on-one engagement and “talk story” sessions
3. Create a mutually beneficial economic assessment of Maunalua Bay
4. Use the assessment to better plan management strategies that utilize business relationships

Approach Description/Details

The first step of our survey was defining the target community. We narrowed down businesses to commercial operators who directly use Maunalua Bay and categorized them by use. This included thrill crafts, snorkel/SCUBA, surf/SUP tours, and parasail operators. Our survey consisted of 14 questions that looked at general demographics of the business, economic value of operations, perceptions on the health of the bay and how they value the natural resources within the bay, and what areas within the bay are used for daily operations. We grouped businesses by location and a majority were located at Koko Marina and Hawaii Kai Shopping Center. Surveys were distributed in two-person teams to each business. One person would be the contact and describe the purpose of our project and the other took notes on any information gathered in the exchange. We asked for an owner or manager and if they were not available we let long-time employees fill out the survey. Most respondents asked us to leave the survey and to pick it up at a later time and one respondent had us ask in more of an interview format.

Overall our response rate was 16% which is too low to make any claims from our results. The few surveys and conservations we had with businesses did reveal a concern for the health of the bay and that it is valued by the businesses that regularly operate within it.
Coral reefs were one natural resource that all respondents agreed had declined since they began running operations, but this could be bias since most surveys were filled out by SCUBA businesses. We did not achieve our intended results with this approach, but with some reflection we realized there are valuable lessons learned from our experience.

Although response rate was low, interaction with businesses revealed valuable input to better inform community engagement and community forward restoration efforts for Maunalua Bay. It was apparent in survey responses and conversations with this group that there was concern for the health of the bay and a recognition of the importance of the bay to their business success. The collected survey responses revealed that businesses all resources listed on the survey were ranked “very important.” These resources included reefs, marine life, water quality, beach/seashore, and other. Reef health dominated resource concern, as businesses highlighted that overall health of these systems have experienced the worst and most drastic degradation over their time in operation.

Conversations with employees also revealed a small group of business owners that regularly operate and dominate the recreational commercial sector in Maunalua Bay. These owners are especially well connected and greatly influenced survey participation. Through the interaction with these businesses, we were informed about the dynamics of intra-businesses relationships and existing tensions with inter-community conservation groups. Moving forward, building the relationship between these businesses and conservation community groups will be necessary for effective management of Maunalua Bay.

As researchers it is important to understand the complex relationships of the community you are working with. Before entering into a community, the sources of tension and conflict should be identified and addressed. All parties/partners involved in conducting the research should be transparent with information and sources of tension. Ideally before conducting research conflict resolution has taken place.

Identifying the key dynamics within the smaller business community is an important step to successfully engage in community based research. We recommend connecting with the identified influential business owners and associated business networks before conducting research. To create mutually beneficial research business owners should have an input in
the research goals and outcomes. From this experience, a survey approach is not the best method for understanding the economic value of Maunalua Bay for business owners. Determining more appropriate methods of engagement based on identified dynamics is necessary. Creating dialogue with businesses before conducting research will allow for more transparency and community input. When conducting research we suggest engaging with business owners on a more personal level with a talk-story interview instead of a survey. With these recommendations, we hope future research initiatives will promote rewarding student and community collaboration in Maunalua Bay and beyond.

For more information:
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