Culture And Controversy At Pu'uhonua O Hōnaunau National Historical Park

By Jennifer Bain
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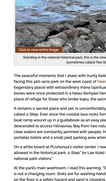
A cultural demonstration of coconut frond weaving Jennifer Bain

In the shade of the Royal Grounds in upper Canoe House, with only the chatter of the Common Myna birds to break the silence, Kaiali'i Kekoa Kaapu sits cross-legged on a lauhala mat. He tackles fielding compliments and questions from people from around the world. It's a skill that "Aunty Abby" developed more than 40 years ago and she has been overseeing the Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park since the late 1970s.

"It energizes me," she says simply of the craft. "It's like a spiritual uplift because all my nothing — the ocean, the sea, the rocks and trees."

Aunty Abby volunteers here on Friday mornings, effortlessly creating upwards of 40 baskets a day. Though she figures she could make 50 if she even stood still. Because she was welcome to take home one of her freshly woven baskets or hats, but since no money can change hands, they're encouraged to put something in the donation box by the visitor center on the way out. Everyone agrees to some things that the park needs.

"She's a treasure to our community," says Kalā Holiday, who is an interpretive ranger and one of Aunty Kekoi's hauhaumu (students).



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Standing in the national historical park, this is the view of the busy seaside park next door known as a Stay Sentinel Hotel Jennifer Bain See Bain's Another Bain Post.

The peaceful momentos that I share with Aunty Kekoi are in sharp contrast with an unusual problem facing the 420-acre park on the west coast of Hawai'i Island. Pu'uhonua o Honaunau is a well-used, legendary place with extraordinary mana (spiritual power), coming in part from 23 ahū (cairns) whose bones were once protected by a heiau, temple here called Hale o Keawe. This land once served as a place of refuge for those who broke laws; the sacred laws and beliefs.

It remains a sacred place and yet, is uncomfortably close to private land and a snorkeling hotspot called 2-Step. Ever since the coastal lava rocks formerly used only by villagers and fishermen as a way to access the ocean, have been paved over, the park has been overwhelmed by visitors who have descended to access Honaunau Bay from two national rock steps. The rocks, tiny sand beach and clear waters are constantly jammed with people. However, there's virtually no infrastructure. Just a few portable toilets and a small paid parking area when I visit.

On a white board at Pu'uhonua's visitor center, I read this message: "Aloha. No snorkeling or swimming allowed in the historical park. 2-Step" on Kai'ulu is located outside of the park. Parking is for national park visitors."

At the park's main washroom, I read this warning: "Swimmers, snorkelers and sunbathers: This facility is not a changing room. Sinks are for washing hands ONLY. Please do not use them to rinse off. Water on the floor is a safety hazard and sand is clogging the drains."



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People use the national historical park's lot to snorkel next door despite signs saying parking is only for park guests Jennifer Bain

From park staff, I learn that nobody formally oversees 2-Step and so when people are injured, they come running to Pu'uhonua o Honaunau for help. That means using limited park resources to treat cuts, scrapes and bruises, launch water rescues, and sometimes even call 911. The park is meeting with the county and the state to see what can be done.

Even more challenging is people's flagrant disregard for parking lot rules. Sometimes the lot is full but the park is empty because snorkelers have taken all the spaces. There is staff at the gate and a \$10 charge for private, non-commercial vehicles, but that does little keep the numbers down. During my visit, I see a steady stream of cars, SUVs and vans as people cruise in bathing suits, carrying snorkeling gear and blatantly walking right past them a sleep.

Standing with Holiday at the lava rock wall that separates the park from 2-Step there are two small buildings in between the dirt from the crowds next door derived from the sanctity of the national historical park. Holiday says that, for her, it's not about the rules. It's about the fact that it's culturally legal (as long until they try to climb out on these protected stones. There are, naturally fears for the health of the coral.



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For a talk to students, interpretive ranger Kalā Holiday wears a traditional loincloth Jennifer Bain

I listen in on a talk that Holiday gives in the amphitheater to a high school group. Established in 1961 on the prehistoric lava flows of Mauna Loa volcano, the park saw some 250,000 visitors in 2021 (the pre-COVID record was 505,731 in 2017). Becoming part of the National Park Service. Holiday allows, can be considered both a blessing and a curse.

The federal status has kept crucial, pre-contact archaeological sites intact. "But becoming a national park has also opened the doors of one of our most revered churches to hundreds of thousands of visitors every single year. Many of which do not even know where they are by the time they arrive and, even to them, accomplishing a visit to a heiau approximating in a site revered as sacred."

Holiday tells the teens that it's "not a flat-fetched comparison to say this is our people's equivalent of the Vatican." He asks how they intend to behave inside a Hawaiian church, while allowing that the word "park" is misleading to many. "Some come here thinking this is a playground and they are completely unaware of what it is to the land. Others are under the impression that they've walked into a museum, unaware that everything in these grounds was made by members of our community and is still being maintained by them today."

If visitors come across Hawaiians engaged in a religious ceremony, he advises, they should not interrupt or ask to take photos of it. If they see cultural demonstrations, they are welcome to engage as elders like Aunty Kekoi — proudly dressed in traditional attire — demonstrate ancient skills as a platform to teach younger generations.



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Now in uniform, interpretive ranger Kalā Holiday stands in the Royal Grounds by the Great Wall Jennifer Bain

As he speaks, Holiday wears a traditional loincloth (malo) and wraps up by asking the students to fill out a survey about their visit. He tells them that it's not mandatory but encourages them to do it by the time he walks one more of the Royal Grounds, the ranger has quickly changed back into his NPS uniform.

The park tries to minimize signs in this sacred space. We pass one feeling sign etched into wood and attached to a rock wall that says "because this area is considered sacred, no picnicking, smoking or bathing is permitted." Outside of the Royal Grounds, there is a designated picnic area by the ocean.

"For more than 300 years, the Royal Grounds functioned as our island's Buckingham Palace," explains Holiday. He notes that it was fishing family and finally established for a temporary contract here in 2022 under pandemic rating rules that gave locals a chance.



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In the Royal Grounds, those two 67 hawaiian images of Hawaiian gods are considered guardians that stand on shores to alert everyone to the great mana (spiritual power) here Jennifer Bain

We stop by Hale o Keawe, a royal mausoleum that once housed the bones of 23 high-ranking chiefs and then raised carvings in their honor. It's surrounded by wooden images called ki'i that represent Hawaiian gods, steps from an area where people can explore tide pools in the lava rock shoreline. The Great Wall that surrounds the Royal Grounds is 400 years old and was constructed using dry wall masonry with no mortar between rocks. At the Royal Fish Ponds, invasive tilapia dominate in the shallow water and kala goats drop by to drink not far from where Aunty Kekoi works in the large thatched Canoe House.

There is much to learn in the Royal Grounds, and a NPS audio tour but this area takes up just a small portion of the park. Past the picnic area, there is a section of the Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail, and a two-mile roundtrip loop called the 1871 Trail that goes past ancient and historic sites to the remains of Kīholo Village.



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This quiet beachfront area of Pu'uhonua is outside of the Royal Grounds and an appropriate spot for picnics and bathing safety Jennifer Bain

With a downpour looming, I skip the trails and drop into one more ranger talk in the amphitheater instead. This time, Holiday's sister Kanani Ecoi shares meaningful and melodic chants, and tells a new group of visitors this time mostly about how to be respectful. What is your sacred place, she asks? What boundaries and rules surround that place?

"It's a good time in the world for compassion and respecting beliefs," Ecoi concludes, after sharing that she was born and raised seven minutes up the road, that her father is native Hawaiian and that they are Great descendants of priests and chiefs.



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Supervisory park ranger Kealia Kaeing and ranger Kanani Ecoi share tips on how to be a respectful visitor to Pu'uhonua and the challenges it faces from those who are not Jennifer Bain

After the talk, I share a few final moments with supervisory park ranger Kealia Kaeing, who has served as the park's cultural anthropologist since 2005 and is a liaison to the native Hawaiian community. She hopes that both Hawaiians and visitors can come here and feel confident in this important space. People don't know a lot of the history of Hawai'i. Asking questions, or about the ceremonies, protocols and practices that are still in place.

Before dodging carloads of wet snorkelers in the parking lot, I stop to read one final sign that suggests seven ways to be a respectful visitor. "Mahalo," it says. "Give thanks for the privilege of visiting a site where only the highest priests and chiefs once set foot."

Stories about: Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park, Pu'uhonua Honau National Historic Site, Kalaiko Honokōhau National Historical Park, Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

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