Volunteering To Cut Invasive Ginger In Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

By Jennifer Bain
February 13, 2023

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At Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, Paul Field (shown) and his wife Jane are project leaders of a volunteer program called Stewardship at the Summit that tackles invasive species./Jennifer Bain

In retrospect, three hours doesn't seem like a particularly impressive amount of time to volunteer to help Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park and the 'āina (land). But as I tackled invasive Himalayan ginger with a lopper one February morning while other visitors made a beeline to the current eruption at Kīlauea volcano or hiked to lava tubes, the repetitive manual labor quickly became addictive and I was sorry when Paul Field insisted it was time to stop.

Just one more patch?

Maybe just one more corner of a patch?

How about just one more stem?

"I don't think we're going to get it all today," a fellow volunteer quipped from somewhere in the rainforest. That, of course, would be impossible.

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Jane Field is one of the Stewardship at the Summit project leaders./Jennifer Bain

Paul and his wife Jane have been leading a weekly volunteer project called Stewardship at the Summit here for almost a decade. They've made impressive strides over 45 acres, but have a modest goal. Slowly clear (and then spray) one area at a time, and hope that helps native species like the 'Ōhi'a Lehua to flourish.

"This isn't just for the 'ōhi'a — it's for everything," Paul elaborated. "Nothing will grow in the ginger. It's so thick that the seeds don't even get to the ground. This area should be full of little ferns. We'll show you some of the mid-story trees that should be in here and they are not. There are a few of them slowly working their way in here, but it's going to be awhile. It's primarily just get the ginger out and we'll see what happens, because nothing will happen while the ginger is in here."

Between October 2021 and September 2022, the stewardship program drew 173 volunteers (including 11 regulars) who devoted 1,718 hours to tackling invasive species on 16.94 acres in five parts of the park. Volunteers mainly cut ginger, but also pulled invasive Strawberry Guava, Himalayan Raspberry and Faya.

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Writer Jennifer Bain holds an armful of invasive Himalayan ginger that she has cut and is about to pile in the rainforest at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park./Paul Field

I volunteered as part of an attempt to travel responsibly and respectfully during my first trip to the Hawaiian Islands, as the state grapples with overtourism, crowding, increased prices, damage to the environment and even requests for tourists to stop coming.

Based on the Island of Hawai'i for eight nights to visit five National Park Service (NPS) sites, I took the online Pono Pledge and promised 10 things, including to "be pono (righteous) on this island" and to "embrace the concept of being a steward of the land." The pledge's website actually names Himalayan ginger as a key environmental threat, saying it may seem "harmless and are very fragrant, but this is one of the most invasive species to Hawai'i's beautiful rainforests." It directs volunteers to the Stewardship at the Summit program I found through NPS sources.

The Pono Pledge site also speaks passionately about saving 'ōhi'a — the state's sacred tree. The keystone species is under threat from Himalayan ginger but also Rapid 'Ōhi'a Death (ROD). Hawai'i Island has confirmed *Ceratocystis lukuohia* (destroyer of 'ōhi'a) and *Ceratocystis huliohia* (disruptor of 'ōhi'a), the two fungal pathogens causing ROD.

Trees may look healthy, but usually die within a few weeks of showing symptoms.

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All Stewardship at the Summit volunteers must thoroughly brush and spray their footwear before heading off into the rainforest./Jennifer Bain

The threats are grim, but the volunteer work was surprisingly joyful.

When I met the Fields and six other volunteers at 8:45 a.m. on a Saturday at the Kīlauea Visitor Center, we signed the requisite waivers and then drove in a convoy to the Devastation Trail parking area where we were given boot brushes and spray bottles of isopropyl alcohol 70 per cent to ensure we didn't trek in any invasive species. The park is full of public boot brushing stations so everyone else can do the same thing.

Paul gave a quick safety talk, advising us to stay alert for holes, "nasty ground cracks" and Western yellowjacket nests. We would prune, but the Fields would return without us to apply herbicide.

Soon we eagerly marched down the trail and up to a closure sign warning hikers about a "hazardous area," which turned out to be our destination. Along the old Byron Ledge Trail, we stopped briefly to admire the Kīlauea volcano's immense lava lake, something I had already seen at 11:30 one night and then 6:30 the next morning because it's infinitely better in the dark and without the early-evening crowds. Then we spread out in the woods to work.

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At night in February, a view of the Kīlauea volcano lava lake within Halema'uma'u crater./Jennifer Bain

Paul was a history professor and Jane managed the front desk of a dental practice. They retired to this island from O'ahu "to live up here and play" in the park that protects 354,461 acres, encompasses the summits of two of the world's most active volcanoes (Kīlauea and Maunaloa) and is a designated International Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Jane has a passion for forests and, after a friend turned them on to volunteering in the park, the Fields quickly devoted themselves to helping eradicate invasive species. Luckily there was an old Stewardship at the Summit program already on the books — created by a ranger and once executed by Scouts — and the NPS let them revive it.

"It truly is a park effort and we get to have all the fun," Paul told me.

When I read on the NPS site that this volunteer opportunity "is often in the shade of the forest with sweet sounds of native honey creepers like 'apapane, 'amakihi and 'ōma'o above to serenade as you work," I eagerly signed up. I came as directed, wearing a long-sleeve shirt that I soon removed, long pants and closed-toed shoes, and bringing my own water, snacks, rain gear and sun protection for the mile-long walk.

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To get to our work site, we hiked down Devastation Trail past sinkholes./Jennifer Bain

I'm not sure what birds I heard in the rainforest that day, but I learned that Himalayan ginger (*Hedychium gardnerianum*) is also known as Kāhili ginger because it resembles the feathered staffs of Hawaiian royalty. It's inedible and was purposely introduced into park housing as an ornamental plant in the 1940s. It sports red and yellow flowers in summer. In late fall and winter, its round orange fruit capsules open to reveal red seeds.

The problem is that Himalayan ginger spreads via rhizomes (underground stems) or by birds eating and spreading the seeds to remote parts of forests. It dominates the forest understory, blocking other species (such as ferns) and the regeneration of native trees. It's easily recognized by its large, glossy, dark green leaves and shoots that grow up to seven feet tall.

It was a gorgeous day and we were sheltered in the forest. We worked quickly and quietly until Paul — who had promised to have all the volunteers back to their cars by about noon — declared it was time to stop and started to pack up.

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Jane Field spotted this ailing 'ōhi'a tree while we headed out to tackle invasive species./Jennifer Bain

Along the trail, Jane had shown me a small, troubled 'ōhi'a that was likely infected with ROD — its limbs spotted yellowish and brown — and another tiny but healthy Guava tree growing near where we cut the ginger. But to see more of the beloved native tree that thrives in a volcanic landscape and sports iconic red blossoms, I drove an hour southwest of the busy main section of the park to its unsung Kahuku Unit.

There hasn't been a Himalayan ginger problem here, but Rapid 'Ōhi'a Death has been confirmed in lower elevations.

First identified in 2014, this fast-spreading fungal disease kills 'ōhi'a trees by blocking water movement. There is no cure yet. 'Ōhi'a is the keystone species in Hawai'ian forests, and ROD has the potential to cause major ecosystem disturbances that many fear will harm watersheds, cultural traditions, natural resources and quality of life.

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A healthy 'ōhi'a tree blooms on Pu'u o Lokuana Trail in the Kahuku Unit./Jennifer Bain

The 116,000-acre Kahuku unit describes itself as "a rolling, pastoral landscape on the slopes of the largest volcano on the planet." It's on the shoulders of Maunaloa — the planet's largest active volcano — on land that was once one of the island's biggest cattle ranches.

To fight invasive species, the unit has put sanitation stations at trailheads and installed new fences to exclude pigs, cattle and other ungulates that could injure 'ōhi'a and expose the trees to ROD. Rangers ask visitors to do simple things like stay on established trails and clean their shoes before and after entering forests. From a map, I saw that you have to drive to the upper paddocks of Kahuku, where there is a decontamination sprayer for tires and shoes. The potholed roads are rather treacherous and only 4X4 vehicles can go beyond the gate.

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Park ranger Wendy Vance at the Kahuku Unit of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park./Jennifer Bain

And so I hiked, spotting healthy, gorgeous 'ōhi'a everywhere that seemed to be all ages, shapes and sizes.

"They are healthy and strong, which is very good news," park ranger Wendy Vance told me at the visitor center. "I know we are very assiduous about having people spray their shoes for the ROD spores, and they spray them with rubbing alcohol. We have had ROD in the park — I mean it's not like it isn't here. We don't have that Kāhili ginger, which is really a death knell for everything else. It makes such a thick mat that it just kills anything. I don't know why they're so healthy. I really don't."

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On the Pu'u o Lokuana Trail, there are plenty of healthy 'ōhi'a trees./Jennifer Bain

It surely helps that this unit typically gets 100 visitors a day — sometimes 150 or 175 — and is currently only open Thursday to Sunday. The main gate opens at 8 a.m. and is closed and locked at 4 p.m. so people can't linger. (The main section of Hawai'i Volcanoes is open 24/7 and the popular park reported 1.26 million visitors in 2021.)

"We like being not crazy, but we really appreciate it when people come in and appreciate the park, so more people is always good. We will never get more hours if we don't have more people," Vance said. "It certainly is the thing that people like about this park. As people say all the time 'Don't tell anybody about this place.' What's great is that people get here and they're just so delighted by the fact that this is a hidden gem."

Jackson Hannah Provance — a park guide who started working here in 2018 as a student through the Pathways Program — chimed in about loving the diversity of Kahuku and the unit's rich history, environment and fascinating geology. I was eager to take Provance's "Birth of Kahuku" guided hike and do a deeper geological dive, but couldn't return the next day for it.

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At the Kahuku Unit, the Pu'u o Lokuana Trail ends at a red-hued cinder cone./Jennifer Bain

Instead, I made the most of the three hours I had at the Kahuku Unit, which I realized was the exact amount of time I devoted to the Stewardship at the Summit program.

I took a scenic drive down bumpy Kahuku Road to see the "ROD Quarantine Gate," and then took a leisurely two-mile hike on the Pu'u o Lokuana Trail by the visitor center. I meandered alone down a historic ranch road and its former 1960s-era airstrip, looking for green olivine crystals found in Maunaloa lava. I admired a stone wall that rests on 1868 lava near a newish petroglyph of the letter D that still has everyone baffled. I lingered at a lava tree mold created during the 1868 eruption when "flying blobs of lava hardened around a living tree," and then molten lava drained away and left a hole that shows the shape of the incinerated tree trunk.

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To stop invasive hitchhikers, the National Park Service asks visitors to brush and clean their footwear on their way into and out of sensitive areas, like here at the Kahuku Unit of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park./Jennifer Bain

The short hike ended at the Pu'u o Lokuana cinder cone.

Here where cinder mining used to take place with explosives and bulldozers, a lush, overgrown quarry is full of songbirds and streaked with red because of naturally occuring iron oxidation. In the trail guide, I read how this unassuming site was a secret radar station during World War II, and how marines once scanned radar screens in a dark room carved inside this cinder cone. Giant concrete blocks that once supported the radar tower are all that remain.

Before I hopped back in my rental car, racing the 4 o'clock deadline to avoid being trapped behind a locked gate, there was time for just one more thing: A pitstop at one final sanitation station to give my boots an extra-vigorous clean.

While You're Exploring The Park:

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Kilauea Lodge and Restaurant has a series of buildings on a quiet property in Volcano just outside Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park./Jennifer Bain

I stayed at the tranquil Kīlauea Lodge & Restaurant, a five-minute drive from the Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park Kīlauea Visitor Center in the village of Volcano. It has 11 guestrooms spread over two buildings (four in Hale Maluna and seven in the two-storey Hale Aloha), plus a small cottage. At the restaurant, order the Volcano Loco, Hawaiian comfort food that tops white rice and a burger patty with a fried egg, gravy, caramelized onions and mushrooms.

Driving between the main section of Hawai'i Volcanoes and the Kahuku Unit, you'll pass the famous Punalu'u Black Sand Beach and then arrive in Nā'ālehuhu. The town is home to Punalu'u Bake Shop, the southernmost bakery in the United States. It draws 200,000 visitors a year and so has a "visitor center" with gardens, live music, an outdoor eating area, a gift shop and a chance to peek into its production area. It's famous for Hawaiian sweet bread, which was introduced here by Portuguese sugar workers in the 19th century. Try the bread as a sandwich or with a hot dog. I can vouch for malasadas, Portuguese-style fried donuts, glazed with lilikoʻi (passionfruit) or stuffed with guava. If you're driving on to Kailua-Kona through Captain Cook, stop at Kona Chips for fabulous handmade furikake potato chips with seaweed and sesame seasoning.

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Before hitting the Kahuku Unit of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, grab a picnic from nearby Punalu'u Bake Shop./Jennifer Bain

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