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[Home Page](#)
[Last Issue Stories](#)
[Arts & Entertainment Listings](#)
[Current Classifieds](#)
[Archives](#)
[About The Journal](#)
[Why Advertise?](#)
[Advertising Calendar](#)
[Advertising Rates](#)
[Submit A Classified Ad](#)
[Subscriptions](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Site Search

The Town of Punalu'u? Proposed development could threaten turtle haven

by Alan D. McNarie

In 1995, at Punalu'u Bay in Ka'u, a unique monument was unveiled: a stone cairn with a plaque depicting a little girl nestled on the shell of a turtle. The monument represented Kauila, a magical being who appeared as either a turtle or a girl and watched over the village children as they played near Punalu'u's often dangerous surf. As it turns out, the plaque may be misleading. According to Auntie Pele Hanoa, a Hawaiian kupuna who lives at the edge of Punalu'u's famous black sand beach, Kauila the turtle actually lived in a spring called Punalu'u in Puna, not Punalu'u in Ka'u. There is a Kauila who protected the children of the Ka'u beach - but she was a mo'okupua, a shape-shifting lizard.

Some say the monument also sends the wrong message. Hugging, touching or otherwise bothering endangered sea turtles is a federal crime.

But if the plaque isn't totally accurate, there's truth in its sentiment. With the possible exception of dolphins and whales, no sea creature in Hawai'i is more beloved than the turtle. And perhaps no place in Hawai'i is more closely associated with the sea turtle than is Punalu'u. Honu, green sea turtles, graze on luxuriant seaweed that grows in the bay's churning waters. At night, honu'ea, or hawksbill turtles, sometimes crawl out of the water to dig their nests in the sand.

Once hunted to near-extinction, the turtle population has increased in recent years. Honu have even taken to basking alongside human beach-goers on Punalu'u's black sand. Today, their chief problem is busloads of tourists, who, despite warning signs, often touch or even pick them up. Until a beachside road was closed last June, nesting honu'ea had to cope with artificially piled sand berms and with vehicular traffic.

In upcoming years, the turtles may have to share the beach with even more humans. A new development group, Sea Mountain Five LLC, is planning to expand Punalu'u's long-dormant Sea Mountain resort. The developers have begun a campaign to actively court the public and are seeking community input for its proposals. They have been talking with individuals and small groups; on January 7, they held a public meeting at the Pahala High School cafeteria attended by 150-200 residents.

The developers presented what looked like fairly radical vision. Instead of a gated golf course subdivision or an isolated resort node, Sea Mountain Five was touting an integrated village with facilities and housing for both newcomers and long-time residents: a place where not just people and turtles, but kama'aina and malihini, could cohabit. And they were inviting community members to join an advisory board to help design it.

Local reaction was mixed. Some residents wondered if the new group was sincere, or if - as one suggested to the Journal afterward - it wasn't the same old plan with "a coat of greenwash."

Auntie Pele Hanoa, who heads the Ka'u Coastal Task Force, urged the group to hold off until her group made its report; she and her daughter Keola later told the Journal that they intended to file for a contested case hearing if the project went forward, and complained that the group's earlier private meetings had excluded kama'aina and native Hawaiians. One resident drew catcalls at the meeting by asking if the resort might include "a Safeway, a Home Depot or a Costco," thereby eliminating shopping trips to Kona.

The majority those who spoke addressed specific concerns, instead of making blanket statements of support or opposition. Some worried that the influx of visitors and new residents would seriously overtax the already popular but fragile beach. Some asked about impact on area roads, police and schools. Others wondered if the resort would

hire locally or import its workers. Several asked about the development's effect on local housing prices. Many found the proposal too vague and demanded more specifics. Ironically, one reason for the vagueness was because the company was following a strategy of engaging the community in dialogue very early in the planning process, instead of presenting a ready-made plan and trying to "educate" local residents into accepting it. Company spokespersons say they want to develop a plan based, at least in part, on community input. The investment group doesn't even own the property yet - it had merely purchased "development rights" and is still conducting market research.

Keeping Ka'u Ka'u?

George Atta is with Group 70, the architectural firm charged with designing that project. He said that Sea Mountain Five's current proposal calls for a 150- to 250-unit hotel of "one to two stories, possibly three in places," set well back from the shore, plus two small commercial zones and an "environmental and cultural center." He also envisions various meeting and recreational facilities, a renovated golf course and a mixture of single and multi-family residences in a range of prices.

Much of that plan is based on existing zoning (see Web link at the end of this article for the current zoning map). The second "commercial zone," for instance, is the site of the old restaurant at the pond behind the bay. Atta said the only zoning change that the group is currently considering is a possible application to subdivide land mauka of the highway, which is currently zoned for 20-acre agricultural lots.

Although existing zoning allows an estimated 2800 housing units, Atta claims that the new plan is to build 1,500-2,000 homes, with more open spaces accessible to all residents. If the new Sea Mountain is built out to 2,000 houses, the development would be about one-third the size of Waikoloa Village in Kohala. But by Ka'u standards this is massive - more than quadruple the size of Pahala town. Such a project could shift the entire district's political, ethnic and economic centers of gravity.

How could such a development be allowed, and still keep Ka'u Ka'u? It's a tough sell in Hawai'i's most rural district. Atta made that very pitch by claiming that the new development would be modeled on Ka'u itself.

According to Atta, Sea Mountain Five's goal is to create not just a subdivision, but a real village (with 2,000 houses, it could qualify as a town). Its inspiration, he told the Pahala audience, would be existing villages such as Pahala and Na'alehu.

Later, in a phone interview with the Journal, he elaborated. The new partners, he said, wanted to "do a development that recaptures some of the spirit of old Hawai'i."

"We would like to create a community," he said, "and not just a bedroom community."

Such a community would require a core source of local jobs.

"In the old days, the economic driver would be the plantation," Atta said. "In modern times, the economic driver would be the hotel."

But a hotel-centered economy suggests a different model than Na'alehu or Pahala. The classic example of a resort node community on this island is Waikoloa - and there are really two Waikoloas: the coastal tourist mecca, with its luxury-peddling King's Shops; and the mauka, resident-oriented Waikoloa Village, with its supermarket-anchored shopping center.

When the Journal asked Atta which Waikoloa the new Sea Mountain would resemble, he said it would be "a mix"; some shops would cater to tourists, but the developers would also encourage the opening of resident-oriented businesses such as a "grocery or convenience store" and "possibly a gas station."

"The intention is also to serve the local residents who would be living in the units there, and to make it more a community," Atta maintained.

How Affordable?

Whether local people could actually afford to live in those units was major concern voiced at the Pahala meeting. Atta gave no flat-out assurances. When one resident pressed him, he said that the group had not even determined a price range for its units yet. But one of the development partners present at the meeting volunteered the example of "a two-bedroom home in Sea Colony" priced \$395,000.

If that is what it costs to live at Sea Mountain, then "that answers the question" of whether local people could afford to live there, said the questioner.

But Atta later told the Journal that the developers' goal was to create "a mix of local as well as outside buyers" in an integrated community. To do that, he said, the development would have to offer a range of multi-family condos to single-family homes at various prices.

It was also in the company's best interest, he said, to build on-site housing where

resort workers could afford to live, since that would improve worker morale and retention. "Worker housing" and "affordable housing," he said, were two separate numbers. Affordable housing requirements - currently set by the County at a minimum of 20 percent of the units constructed - would be triggered by a rezoning action, but workforce housing was "triggered by the development of an employment center such as a hotel...so the number of units is determined by a negotiation with the county housing agency," he said

Atta said Sea Mountain Five would look at the workforce housing numbers from two viewpoints: "what the law requires" and what resort businesses needed "in order to help the employees." But he said that he could not estimate how many worker housing units might be supplied until the company had finished its economic studies.

Atta said that the company would support training programs to help local workers compete for resort jobs. But again, he couldn't provide specifics.

"I don't know how many jobs are anticipated to be created, and I don't know if the skills of the people who are living there currently are going to match, and I don't know if the people currently living there will want the type of jobs that are being created," he said, "So right now, I can't give an intelligent answer to that."

Streetlights and Wildlife

One major concern was the intertwined fate of the beach park and the turtles. Atta repeatedly assured the crowd that the beach, and the pond behind it, would be preserved.

Participants at the meeting also raised several environmental concerns, which developers generally pledged to address - though again, plans were vague.

Atta maintains that Sea Mountain Five does not intend to commercially develop the current beach park, which is actually located on private land. But he is touting a possible "cultural and environmental center" near the pond behind the beach, where the shuttered restaurant stands.

"We're looking at this pond area and the space around there as basically a cultural and environmental center," he said. He noted that his group had talked to Kamehameha Schools, the Department of Hawaiian Homelands, and the Cousteau Society about planning a center, but added that the developers also wanted to "hear what your ideas are and accommodate that as well."

Atta told the crowd that the developers had discussed the park's management with the county's Parks and Recreation Department, and were "open to a number of suggestions from the county itself." The development group, he said, "would like to have some ability to maintain [the park area] because it's to their benefit." He also pledged the group to "preserve every archeological site that we know of." He noted that in addition to a 1986 archeological study, a new survey was now in progress.

What happens a short distance back from the beach remains a sticky question. Atta told the Journal that the company was wrestling with the question of what to do with some lots near the bay that had already been zoned residential.

"We're having a dilemma right now, because there are higher values toward the ocean," he admitted, "but we know that the community would rather have less or no development toward the ocean."

Residents also expressed concerns about water quality, including the effects of golf course runoff on the bay and ponds. Atta said that the course would be redesigned by a firm that had done Audubon gold and silver-standard courses (courses meeting environmental rules promulgated by the Audubon Society).

"We will be making sure that the design and operation of the golf course is such that the water quality will not be affected," he told the crowd.

In answers to other questions, he said that the development would have a sewer system and that the site's two existing wells could supply "maybe two-thirds to three-quarters of the projected site"; the company may need to drill a new well to make up the difference. Atta said that he believed the local aquifer "should have enough" water to support both the wells and the area's freshwater ponds.

The effect of outdoor lighting on wildlife was another concern. One resident claimed that the endangered hawksbill turtles would be the development's "Achilles heel." Hatchling turtles use moonlight to orient themselves when they head for the sea; the questioner doubted that the developers could get thousands of residents to shut off outside lights after 8 p.m. to protect the turtles on their journey. Another pointed out that petrels, which nest on Mauna Loa and feed at sea, were sometimes confused by the lights of Pahala, landed on dry ground by mistake, and couldn't get aloft again

unaided.

Atta suggested that careful landscaping and down-turned light fixtures could mitigate the impact on the petrels. Later, he told the Journal that he believed the new building units would be far enough back from the coast that their lights wouldn't affect the turtles.

Size Matters

At the heart of many residents' concerns about Sea Mountain is the fact that Punalu'u, by its very nature, is no Waikoloa. Gem though the beach might be, it is only a single, arc of black sand - not the long stretches of white sand serving Waikoloa's sun-worshipping hordes. And Punalu'u's basaltic sand, generated by local erosion, is being lost faster than it is being renewed - a problem aggravated by visitors who sometimes scoop up plastic bags of sand to take home.

"It's a very small beach...extremely small," noted one resident. "There will be more people here, and there will be more people on the beach. Whenever there are more people, there's going to be some kind of impact."

The little beach is also not exactly a mecca for swimmers, raising safety questions. Heavy waves funnel into the cove, and the currents can be vicious.

Guy Enriques, who runs a small souvenir shop on the beach, told the Journal that every year he performs "probably four or five in-the-water rescues, because they won't put a lifeguard down here.... Today I had 911 standing by. I had my boogie board out. Two times I almost had to go into the water to get people out."

Enriques deplored the condition in which the current owners have left the area, and generally supports Sea Mountain Five's efforts - but he does have reservations about the sheer size of the proposed project.

"I don't mind development," he said, "but why do we have to be so big?"

The size issue is also a major concern for the Hanoas. They scoff at the notion that anything so massive could be friendly to the beach.

The Hanoas claim that the beach is already being seriously degraded by the hordes of tour buses that descend on it daily.

"They're blowing a lot of hot steam," said Auntie Pele. "Can anybody imagine, after seeing those plans, where they would put all those houses?"

"This is the only accessible beach in Ka'u, and it's used by the communities of the whole island, from Volcano to South Kona. It's being destroyed daily, because the state is negligent," fumes her daughter Keola, who runs Hawaiian summer cultural programs at the beach for school children. She maintains that laws protecting the endangered turtles are being flouted, and that neither the DLNR nor the federal government have shown the will to act.

The questions of environment and economics twist around each other like yin and yang. Could the sand and the turtles survive the impact of thousands of new residents and tourists? And would thousands of new residents and tourists be satisfied to share one little patch of black sand with questionable swimming conditions?

"I don't think it will be marketed as a good swimming beach," Atta told the Journal. "I think it will be marketed for the scenic beauty and the sense of old Hawai'i."

One approach to both mitigating beach impacts and keeping resort patrons satisfied may lie in providing alternate activities.

"The hotel area will have recreational spaces," Atta said. "The question is exactly how many swimming pools, how many tennis courts and how accessible they will be to residents."

He said his group has also talked with the DLNR about the possibility of clearing boulder-choked Nino'ole Cove so beachgoers could have an alternate site. He maintained that the developer could actually play a positive role in the maintenance of the area's coves and ponds.

"I think people live under the misapprehension that no action is no impact," he commented. "No action results in continued degradation of those ponds anyway. My personal belief is that a kind of managed action will result in better water quality and even a better biodiversity."

Atta also pointed to the recreational possibilities of nearby Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, including the recently acquired mauka section. Park officials, strapped for maintenance funding, have predicted that the new area may not be open to the public for years, but Atta thought that local developers might be able to partner with the National Park Service to advance that timetable.

"The National Park, in my mind, can be a catalyst for eco-friendly businesses and a

more environmentally friendly kind of development," he said.

The Scorpion and the Turtle

One major issue in Ka'u is trust.

This is not an innocent or naive community. Years of failed development schemes, including the original Sea Mountain, have left many residents savvy and skeptical. Even the old canard, "You can't stop progress," doesn't hold much weight here. In the past Ka'uites have scrutinized numerous development schemes - the Pahala prison proposal, the Ka'u spaceport, the Hawai'i Riviera Resort - found them badly flawed, and sent the schemers packing.

So when Atta addressed the audience in Pahala, he discovered that they'd come armed with fairly sophisticated questions about economics, environmental impact and social services. Many also acknowledged that Sea Mountain Five was offering them things that they wanted, including local jobs for their children.

"Many of the kids are working in Kona," one resident said, and complained of the long, dangerous drive. "There are many accidents. Many of them die."

But the emotional baggage of encounters with other developers also generated a whole new class of questions: How committed was the new group to seeing the project through? How could the community be sure that Sea Mountain Five would do what it promised? Would the developers, as one resident speculated, play the community along until it got the needed permits, then sell the project off and run with the profits? One resident summed up the community's suspicions with, appropriately, a turtle parable. One day, she recounted, a scorpion asked a turtle for a ride to the other side of the pond. The turtle agreed reluctantly, after repeated assurances that the scorpion would not sting it. The scorpion climbed on the turtle's back, and they started across the pond. But halfway across, the scorpion began stinging the turtle over and over. The turtle asked the scorpion why it had broken its promise.

"The scorpion said, 'Hey, man, that's my nature,'" the speaker concluded, then added, "It's important to the community that you reveal your true nature."

The Sea Mountain Five representatives claimed they were in it for the long term, and that their investment in the project increased with each passing day. They got some support from Enriques, who said he'd been approached early on by the developers, and had suggested some changes - and was surprised to see those modifications incorporated in a new round of drafts.

Enriques later told the Journal that he'd seen some Sea Mountain representatives "bumming around, looking around the place," and gotten into a conversation with them. They'd showed him a tentative map of their plans and asked for his thoughts. Enriques was shocked to see that on the maps, the park had been replaced by a new 18th golf hole, and that the planned hotel was sitting right on the edge of a nearby cliff, dominating the view.

"I told them that no way was I going to stand for that," Enriques said.

He made several suggestions, including preserving the park, adding a cultural center, and moving the hotel away from the edge of the pali - and was surprised when, a few weeks later, the developers returned with a new map, following his suggestions. He was even more surprised and impressed when he saw the map displayed at the Pahala meeting.

"What they'd showed to me, they also had shown to the community," he said.

Enriques said he also suggested that the developers show their good faith to the community by signing a Memorandum of Agreement with the County and by setting up a special community fund, with a fee from each property sale paid into a special fund for Ka'u schools.

He said he was very impressed with the developers - thus far. Even so, he remained skeptical.

"I don't want to jump up for joy until maybe the Memorandum of Agreement is signed," he said, "and then maybe I'll jump on one leg. I want to keep a level head and have good thoughts, but not get lost in a fairy tale that maybe isn't going to come true."

Coming next issue:

The Future of the Ka'u Coast -- Part 4

[▲ Top of Page](#)