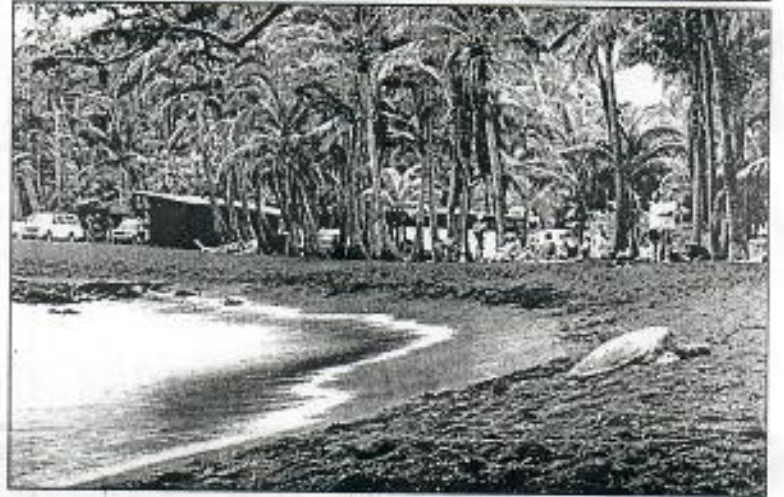


ALAN D. McNARIE

Ka'u Landing '99
Aug.

Of Turtles and Tour Buses

*As local families face off
over the issue of closing
the sand road at Punalu'u
Black Sand Beach, both
sides say they are fighting
for the beach's survival.*



The unpaved road at Punalu'u Black Sand Beach can be driven from end to end in a few tens of seconds, and walked in two or three minutes. But the short stretch of packed sand and stone has been the center of controversy for years. Now community members are squaring off over whether to close the road entirely. Opponents say the road and the artificially-built-up berm that protect it cause beach erosion, foster a dangerous traffic problem, and threaten nesting sea turtles. Proponents say the road is needed for the tour bus industry that supports local families with vending stands at the beach; they maintain that the berm is actually preserving the beach from further erosion. But the road controversy may be symptomatic of deeper and more complex issues in a beautiful but troubled beach community.

The County Public Works Department recently revived a proposal to pave the road, only to have the idea die again in the face of local opposition. Residents Pele Hanoa and her daughter, Keolalani, recently made a presentation to the County Council, proposing that the road be closed off. Councilmember Julie Jacobson has called a public meeting at Punalu'u to discuss the issue on August 19 at 7 p.m.

They Use the Coconut Trees As Obstacle Courses."

At its narrowest, the sand road is barely wide enough for two cars to pass. At other points, it has swollen to nearly 60 feet wide. Just above the widest point in the road, Keolalani Hanoa's parents camp on the land once owned by her grandmother.

Hanoa has run a summer cultural immersion program for Ka'u District's native Hawaiian children for eight years now, converting the park pavilion at the sand road's south end into a classroom festooned with "keep out" signs, educational materials and an upside-down Hawaiian flag. She points to the telephone pole in front of her driveway. When she was a child, she says, at her grandmother's on

some summer nights, "I used to sleep out by that pole," which "was buried in sand seven feet high." Now the pole stands on a bare lava pillow, and the road branches around it on both sides. She watches as a Jack's Tour bus swings wide of the lava pillow, driving on what was once her grandmother's front yard. Five minutes later, another bus does the same thing. "They back up into our private driveways and park their buses and leave them running with no people in them," she says, and adds that at other times the big buses have double parked across the driveway. The two Jack's Tour buses maneuver around not only moving vehicles, but a half-dozen parked cars and trucks, creating more pressure to run on the road's haphazardly expanding shoulders. Meanwhile, the large asphalt parking lot by the restrooms and pavilion stands only about 2/3 full.

The tour buses often stop by the concession stands at the Puna end to unload passengers, then pick them up near the restrooms at the Kona end. Knots of trudging bus tourists are joined by visitors coming down from the parking lot, as well as those parked on the road. Local children charge up and down the berm on their way to and from the beach. "The children literally have to dodge buses," says Hanoa.

At night, residents report, the sand road in front of their houses and the paved private road behind have become an after-hours oval race track for local youths. Four wheel-drive vehicles "use coconut trees as obstacle courses and run from the lei stands to the wharf," says Hanoa.

Why Did the Turtle Cross The Road?

Humans aren't the only visitors to Punalu'u. At the south end of the beach during their lunch break, some of Hanoa's students go boogie-boarding, adroitly dodging an unusual obstacle. As a wave rushes past, a long flipper suddenly emerges from the water; one of the cove's famous sea turtles.

On any given day, visitors can see green sea

turtles feeding on the *limu* (seaweed) that grows in the cove. Once hunted for food, the turtles are now protected as endangered species, and have returned in increasing numbers, with increasing boldness. Five of them now regularly haul out to bask on the beach on sunny days, much to the delight of tourists.

Guy Enriques runs one of the concession stands; his mother and mother-in-law own two of the others. He once hunted and sold the turtles to Volcano House for soup. "I used to make my money off turtle meat," he says. "Now I make my money by keeping them safe." His shop sells nothing but upscale T-shirts and sweatshirts with turtle motifs. A sign above the stand invites visitors to enquire about "turtle etiquette," and he passes out flyers that announce, "...HAWAIIAN SEA TURTLES AT PUNALUU LIKE TO REST ON THE SAND. THEY ARE NOT SICK. DO NOT TOUCH. ALL SEA TURTLES ARE PROTECTED IN HAWAII..."

But not all visitors pick up the flyer, or read the sign near the middle of the beach, announcing the turtle's protected status. Enriques says he frequently "runs down the beach to protect a turtle" from visitors harassing it. Other residents describe people picking up turtles, grabbing their shells to hitch rides in the water, even dragging them out of the water to pose for pictures. And the turtle-harassers are not all tourists. "The hardest problems I have had are with local people who think they own them," says Enriques.

Green sea turtles generally do not pull out much beyond the tide line to bask. But another, much rarer turtle sometimes ventures further inland. Unlike the greens, which generally nest in the remote northwest Hawaiian islets, the hawksbill lays its eggs on the main islands—and most nest on the Big Island. But "most" means only 44 known females, according to wildlife biologist Larry Katahira, who runs a Federal turtle tracking program. Occasionally, hawksbills attempt to

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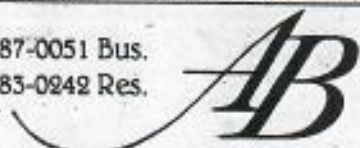
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program. Occasionally, hawksbills attempt to nest at Punalu'u. Katahira says that the last known successful nesting took place near the Puna end of the beach in 1996. But at least two hawksbills made nesting attempts last year.

Because of the Hawksbills' presence, opponents of the road have interested the Earth Justice Defense Fund in filing litigation to force the closure of the road.



PHOTO: LOIS LEWIS

This Hawksbill, missing a rear flipper, a rusty tracking transmitter on her back, tried five times in one night to dig a nest at Punalu'u.

But Enriques, whose shop depends on tour bus dollars, opposes the closure. He claims that there is "only one documented case" of a turtle attempting to cross the road. Other residents, however, have showed *Ka'u Landing* photographs of at least two different turtles on the road. The most recent, a female with a missing hind flipper, crawled over the berm during the nesting season last year, and dragged herself to the front yard of the house rented by Lois Lewis. "She tried five times" to build a nest that night, according to Lewis. Finally, well after dawn, the female returned to the sea without laying any eggs.

Enriques believes there simply wasn't anywhere suitable for laying eggs above the road. "It's all hard dirt, rocks, absolutely no place where a turtle can nest," he says, and adds, "It's too damp there." He cites Katahira in predicting that even if the berm is torn down, the low-lying area may not be suitable nesting habitat.

But Katahira himself maintains a careful neutrality on the road issue. "For the turtle, definitely, if you let the wave action take its course, that area would provide a more natural beach," he notes. But he says several factors work against nesting turtles at Punalu'u. Artificial lights disorient them; the roots of coconut palms, planted in the sand by developers, obstruct nest excavation. The turtles generally nest in 2-2 1/2 feet of loose sand and gravel—a depth that currently may not exist in Lewis's yard.

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These factors may or may not have stopped the maimed female from laying her eggs. Katahira says turtles often engage in "false nesting," digging holes they don't use for unknown reasons.

Road opponents maintain that the very fact that the hawksbills come to Punalu'u can put them in harm's way, whether they nest or not. And in a population as tiny as the hawksbill's, the loss of a single breeding female could be crucial.

The Case of the Missing Sand

Each large tour bus can hold 55 passengers, notes Hanoa, who estimates that 20-40 big buses stop at the beach each day, plus smaller buses, tour vans, and rental cars. Since Puna's Kaimu black sand beach disappeared under lava flows, she says, tour traffic to Punalu'u has increased dramatically—and so has beach erosion. She spots a couple filling a zip-loc bag full of sand for a souvenir, and sends one of her students down to politely intercept them. Removing sand from the beach is illegal, but the small sign to that effect is widely ignored. A few minutes later, two more tourists do the same thing. Hanoa points out the cumulative effect of hundreds of plastic bags, day after day, on a beach where the sand is already a precious commodity.

Lewis used to work at one of the concession stands, which sell small packets of black sand for souvenirs. She thinks that the vendor's little packets, even if gathered off private property, set a bad example. "People would tell me, 'Why should I pay \$2.50 for that little bag of sand, when I can just take some?'" she recalls.

The residents that *Ka'u Landing* interviewed all agree that the beach is eroding, but disagree sharply about the role that the road and berm play in that erosion. Hanoa believes the steep berm increases erosion, causing sand to wash back into the bay: "The County comes and grades the road and makes the berm so high that the sand cannot just sit." But

Continued on page 25

ried about the area that he calls the "middle bay," where a layer of sand still offers safe access into the water. If the berm is lowered, he believes, the sand will wash inland onto private property, leaving more bare rock.

The reality may be more complex. "The road is the artificial feature. The berm is natural," says geologist Jack Lockwood. But the County's efforts in piling sand from the road area back onto the berm, he says, gives the landward side a much steeper slope: "The sand would naturally be extending inland if it weren't for the road."

The cove, he says, naturally accumulates sand produced all along the coast. The problem is the rate of sand replacement. Unlike white sand beaches, which are renewed with particles from continuously growing coral, or the lost black sand beach at Kalapana, which was supplied with fragments from the explosive meeting of lava flow and the ocean, Punaluu's black sand comes primarily from the slow erosion of basalt. "In that particular area, the sand is always being renewed, but at a very slow rate," says Lockwood.

Land subsidence may also be increasing erosive wave action at the beach, suggests Katahira. But how all these human and natural factors interact at Punaluu may require a specific study to find out.

Same Goals, Same Frustrations, Different Answers

The sand road issue may have provided a flash point for deeper, accumulated frustrations. When asked about the road, few local residents could confine themselves to that topic. The burgeoning bus traffic at Punaluu after the loss of Kaimu was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in county infrastructure and services. The park's three restrooms are sometimes besieged with two or three busloads of tourists at once. Residents complain of visitors using their front yards for a bathroom. Kama'aina families say that the freshwater wells on their property now smell foul. Old-time residents say that a tide-flushed marsh once existed behind the beach; it was excavated into a pond for a now-defunct restaurant and permanently dammed by the palm-tree-reinforced berm. Now residents and vendors alike complain of the stench from the pond when the wind is wrong. Beer cans line the cracks of the ruined wharf; toilet paper festoons the trail leading northward from the beach to the giant Punaluu Nui I'ciau, where native Hawaiians still worship. Along the tideline on the beach, cigarette butts can average seven or eight per yard. Hanoa complains that homeless people living on the park's edge have trashed the landscape with abandoned cars and pets and have depleted the cove with gill-net fishing. "My grandparents were opelu fishermen. They made their living from the ocean. They fed fish pumpkin and taro. Nobody feeds the fish anymore. They just take them."

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With police and DLNR enforcement officers too few and far away, residents on both sides of the road issue have become their own police, intervening with sand thieves, speeders and turtle-harassers. To combat inadequate park maintenance, Enriques has equipped his children with "little scoop nets that they use to pick up cigarettes." Hanoa's students hauled out 75 bags of trash in one month last year. But the strain sometimes releases itself as anger. "You cannot go over there and bench press a turtle, or take Zip-Loc bags full of sand that you're going to leave in your rental car anyway," Hanoa fumes. "They have to be accountable for the damage. Make them be accountable."

Anti-road residents have found an ally in Jacobson, who would like to see the parking lot of the derelict restaurant opened as a turn-around point for the buses. The vendors, she believes, might also be relocated to the area of the restaurant, and the concrete pad of the concession stands removed to reestablish a channel between the ponds and the ocean. "I would like [the vendors] to be open to considering alternatives," says Jacobson, who hopes they will consider "the possibility that there might be an advantage to these other locations."

Enriques, in turn, wants his opponents to be open to less radical solutions. He suggests closing the sand road at night during hawksbill nesting season and putting up signs and possibly speed bumps to slow traffic. But he wants to keep his stand on the beach that he loves "more than any place else on Earth," where he and his family can keep watch on the turtles.

Both sides, for now, appear to be on a collision course—although each claims to want to prevent more erosion and to keep both the turtles and their children safe. And, both claim that they are fighting for the beach's survival. "Both of them have been very sympathetic to the turtles and to perpetuating Hawaiian culture," attests Katahira, who has worked with both the Enriques family and the Hanoas.

When asked if he had ever talked directly with the Hanoas about the road issue, Enriques stands for a moment, staring toward the pavilion at the Kona end. "No," he says thoughtfully. "But maybe I will." 🌺

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