

Punalu'u residents

□ Nesting habits of rare hawksbill turtle are major concern

By Janet Snyder
Tribune-Herald

PUNALU'U — Punalu'u residents and environmental officials want Hawaii County to close off the beach road to tour buses, which drive up to nesting grounds of the rare hawksbill turtle.

Pele Hanoa, a Punalu'u community leader, told a group of County Council members and residents that excursion buses drive right onto the black sand beach daily, disturbing the egg-laying process.

The buses deposit onto the rapidly-eroding dunes some 500-1,000 tourists, many of whom poke and

prod the turtles.

"This is all honu grounds. It hurts the honu," Hanoa said.

Pointing to a narrow entryway to the beach, she suggested a gate to bar the buses, but not tourists altogether.

"We just want to block off part of this road so the honu can come back and lay their eggs," Hanoa said.

Hawksbill turtles are among the rarest turtle species, with only about 44 known nesting females in the state, and for 90 percent of them Punalu'u beach is their preferred nesting ground, according to Volcanoes National Park research management specialist Larry Katahira.

Katahira, who has monitored the turtles for the past decade, said he agreed with Hanoa on the need for a gateway to bar traffic from entering the beach to protect the turtles.



LOUISE



K. HANOA

"We had two turtles try to nest the past few days, but they got scared away by the traffic, even in the middle of the night," Katahira said.

They made repeated attempts to nest but were too disturbed to lay eggs, he said.

As the group, organized by council member Julie Jacobson and attended by council colleagues Dominic Yagong, Nancy Pischchio and Curtis

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seek bus ban



Tour buses unload passengers Thursday at the beach at Punalu'u. The heavy traffic has caused concern for nesting hawksbill turtles.

T-H photo
by Robbyn Peck

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Tyler, surveyed the scene, a half dozen full-sized tour buses rolled up to the beach.

Katahira said that in desperation he and his workers put a fence around the nest of one intrepid mother turtle so that it wouldn't get run over.

"This beach is really good for hawksbill nesting if we can restore it right now," Katahira said.

Councilman Tyler indicated that the county may move to protect the animals under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

"We can make it more restrictive (than the federal law) but not less

restrictive," Tyler said. "There is a conflict with the Endangered Species Act."

Another problem the buses pose is the nuisance of tourists intruding onto the neighbors' beachfront property in search of restrooms.

Lois Lewis, a Punalu'u beach homeowner, said: "I have 20 to 40 Japanese tourists in my front yard a day. They go to the bathroom in my yard."

Another serious concern, residents said, is that of public safety.

Pele Hanoa's daughter Keolalani, a Hawaiian cultural educator whose

seek ban of buses

house faces the beach and who is the daughter of kupuna Pele, told the Tribune-Herald: "(The buses) speed here at 45 miles per hour and I've made calls to Roberts and Jack's Tours for years, but nothing happened.

"My kids have been dodging these tour buses for years," she said.

Punalu'u, whose white-cap-swept seas are fed by freshwater springs, should be an idyllic recreation spot.

But Keolalani and Pele Hanoa showed the inspection group a homeless encampment in one of the beach's two pavillions.

Residents have been chased away from using public barbecue pits by the squatters, who took the facility over about six months ago, they said.

They also posed a threat to the turtles.

Some of the homeless people have set cross nets overnight — far beyond the legal four-hour limit, and neighbors found and released two turtles trapped in the nets this week.

Council member Jacobson plans to report on the Punalu'u situation to the County Council at the next meeting on Wednesday.