

EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES

Column: Save Haiku Stairs for cultural, environmental education

By Charles Burrows • Aug. 12, 2021

Anyone who has climbed to the top of Haiku Stairs would never advocate tearing them down.

The cable house at the summit sits close to the magnificent peak of Puukeahiakahoe. The astounding wonder and glory of Koolau-poko surrounds you and commands heightened awareness of your responsibility to respect and care for all that encompasses you.

As a Native Hawaiian cultural practitioner and environmental science educator, I took my Kamehameha Schools high school students up Haiku Stairs 40 years ago, to instill this responsibility, teach them about the cultural and environmental history of the area, and guide them in conducting field studies. I was not alone in doing this; in the years the stairs were open, many educators and scientists used the stairs as an open-air classroom and science lab, along with science clubs and conservation organizations. Access to places like Haiku Stairs is critical to enriching the quality of educational experiences and increasing students' absorption of knowledge. But now the City Council is advocating removal of the Haiku Stairs.

Educational research has shown that if students open a book to study the mo'olelo of Haiku, its watershed, geology or endangered plants, they may understand it, but they probably won't care that much about it compared to seeing and learning these things standing on Puukeahiakahoe. If kids can't experience the Haiku watershed and touch, smell, investigate, explore and connect to it, their knowledge retention and understanding drops exponentially.

Children as well as adults need to experience incredible venues like this in

order to build connections that will lead them to invest time and energy into advocating for preservation and conservation of these places throughout their lives. But we are seeing the door closing on access to Haiku Stairs and other areas as we speak.

In the case of Haiku Stairs, we see the city taking ownership of that mountain and forbidding any taxpayer who paid for the acquisition of that land to access it ever again. We, the taxpayers who paid \$1 million in 2002 to repair the stairs, are now being told we will pay \$1 million to tear down access to a place we should have the right to access. In addition, the Department of Hawaiian Homelands is forbidding hikers to cross a sliver of DHHL property to access Haiku Stairs, treating the area like private land and citing liability concerns.

Can you imagine if we permanently closed down our beach parks like Sandy Beach, Hanauma Bay or Pipeline because of liability concerns? They remain open despite an average of 65 drownings in the ocean here every year. In seven decades, there has never been anyone seriously injured climbing Haiku Stairs. When asked what expenditures it had made over 20 years to pay for insurance, settlements or court costs, the Board of Water Supply acknowledged in its environmental impact statement, "There have been no claims or settlements regarding the Haiku Stairs."

The city's own Koolau-poko Sustainable Communities Plan requires it to "protect scenic views, provide recreation, and promote access to shoreline and mountain areas," and "preserve significant historical features and retain significant vistas with significant archaeological features." Yet this is being ignored. Educational opportunities are in jeopardy.

Haiku Stairs is next on the chopping block, if we don't fight to save it. There is a brilliant plan created by Friends of Haiku Stairs to protect the area, manage it and eliminate any disturbances to Haiku neighbors, but instead of implementing it, the Council has resolved to eradicate access to this historical, recreational, educational and cultural area forever.

Charles Pe'ape'a Makawalu Kekuewa Burrows taught at Kamehameha Schools and has been active in protecting cultural and environmental resources in the Ahupuaa of Kailua and Kaneohe.



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