Nānākuli Wetland and Watershed Project
Restoring Respect to and Promoting Active Stewardship of a Bio-Cultural Community Resource

A forgotten and disgraced muliwai (estuary) in Nānākuli, O’ahu, regains its respect as a natural and cultural resource for the local community.

Introduction
In 2015, Mālama Learning Center launched a multi-year project to begin the process to heal the environment in and around the waters of Nānākuli: The Nānākuli Wetland and Watershed Project engages keiki (youth), kumu (teachers), makena (parents), kūpuna (elders), and the general public in a community-based and student-led project that spans the mountains to the sea.

Overarching Goals
• Restore and maintain the Nānākuli muliwai
• Reduce erosion and enhance watershed capacity in the Nānākuli region
• Understand and appreciate ecosystem and cultural values of the Nānākuli muliwai and watershed.

Objectives
• Conduct monthly baseline water quality monitoring of the muliwai and ocean
• Remove invasive alien plants and replace with native species in experimental plots in the uplands as well as muliwai
• Remove land-based and marine debris on every outing
• Build community awareness of the muliwai among park and beach users
• Reframe the muliwai as an outdoor classroom and a community resource
• Develop a youth-initiated shared vision for the future of the muliwai

Activities
• Teacher Professional Development
• School presentations and field explorations
• Monthly community service projects
• Student research projects
• Community outreach presentations
• Videos and television outreach

Evaluation Methods
• Pre/post surveys
• Interviews of students and key partners
• Digital storytelling
• Restoration photo documentation

Community Engagement Measures to Date
• Schools: 4 public schools, grades 6-12; 2 institutes of higher learning
• Subjects: science, honors and remedial biology, natural resources, Hawaiian culture
• Students: 400+
• Teachers: 40+
• Volunteer hours: 1,300+
• Community partners: 2 grass-roots groups, 9 non-profit organizations, 3 government agencies, 1 business
• Media outreach: 100,000 TV viewers, unknown number of print/online news readers
• Community events: in process

Challenges
• Fear and misperceptions
• Lack of time of teachers, students, and staff to “go deep”
• Steep learning curve to use water quality monitoring equipment
• Limited historical information
• Forming more questions than answers

Lessons Learned
• Nurture a feeling of inclusion for all interested in helping
• Build partnerships with organizations to share resources
• Involve unlikely partners
• Provide funds to schools to cover field expenses
• Develop systems to organize information
• Be flexible while results-oriented
• Share your story widely

Next Steps
• Expand and refine water quality monitoring techniques
• Conduct biological surveys of aquatic plants and animals
• Continue to engage current and new schools and groups
• Assist students with research projects and videos
• Conduct community hō‘ike (exhibition/celebration)
• Refine and continue project next school year
• Create educational mural with all schools and community
• Seek partnerships to continue project leading to restoration

Mālama Learning Center is a small, non-profit organization based in West O’ahu dedicated to facilitating community-based environmental education that honors Hawaii’s host culture. We teach and inspire people to create healthy living environments – on the land, in the sea, and within communities.

www.malamalearningcenter.org Contact: Pauline Sato, Executive & Program Director at pauline@malamalearningcenter.org for more information.

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