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5 Great Hawai'i
Eco-Voluntourism
Adventures

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IT'S
EASY
BEING
GREEN

*Ready to get some Hawai'i dirt under your fingernails? Dedicate some time on your next vacation to eco-voluntourism projects and you'll learn more about the Islands' fragile environment, fascinating history and actually give back to a place you love. **By Maureen O'Connell***



Vacationing eco-volunteers help clear invasive plants along Maui's coastline.



icture yourself in the Islands.

You're standing above drifting cumulus clouds near the summit of Haleakalā, the massive volcano that gives shape to more than three-quarters of the island of Maui. Headed to the visitor viewing area, some 10,000 feet above sea level, to snap awe-inspiring photos? Nope. En route to a lush, green trail for a leisurely hike? Not exactly.

Instead, you are decked out in work boots and gardening gloves, poised to sink your hands into volcanic dirt to help clear a forest of invasive plants.

Sound like fun? Welcome to your next Hawai'i vacation!

For many of us, the concept of doing any sort of work while on vacation in Hawai'i is, well, kind of counterintuitive. Even so, "eco-voluntourism" is a vacation concept that is increasingly catching on with Hawai'i travelers.

Eco-voluntourism, and the more recognized travel term "ecotourism," are not the same thing, says Kirsten Whatley, author of *Preserving Paradise: Opportuni-*

ties in Volunteering for Hawai'i's Environment. With the latter, you get a nature experience—anything from a hike in a remote valley to a snorkeling cruise circling an offshore coral reef. But, typically, no one gets dirty. Eco-voluntourism gets you right into nature for some real work for a good cause.

On Haleakalā, home to more endangered species than any other national park in the United States, there are opportunities to get dirt under your fingernails to help protect native plants. Along Hawai'i shorelines, where drifting plastic bags are often gobbled up by sea turtles and other marine animals mistaking rubbish for a jellyfish snack, there are eco-voluntourism programs that will have you on the beach scooping up waterlogged litter to protect marine life.

Hawai'i's natural beauty is far from impervious to environmental threats. Due largely to aggressive alien plant and pest species and its mid-Pacific isolation, Hawai'i leads the nation in endangered and threatened species, with 61 animals and 319 plants on current lists.

While you might doubt that pulling invasive weeds or cleaning a stretch of beach could make much of a dent, when a single volunteer teams up with other volunteers the result is *laulima*, the Hawaiian word for many hands working to-

gether. That can make all the difference.

Many managers at Hawai'i green-minded nonprofits, as well as our national parks and historic sites, welcome help from visitors. By taking time during your vacation to pitch in—whether for a few hours or a few days—you're sure to learn more about Hawai'i's fragile environment and fascinating history while meeting like-minded people from the Islands and elsewhere.

First-time voluntourists sometimes surprise themselves by ranking the work as the "most memorable, most meaningful part of their stay in the Islands," says Whatley. "It creates relationships with people and the place that are much more real, so that you're not just experiencing Hawai'i on the surface."

Choose a work opportunity that involves some exertion under the Hawaiian sun and you'll likely get plenty sweaty. You could wrap up a workday in mud-caked shoes, or with seawater-soaked hair. Still, we're betting you'll have a good time in the process, and leave the Islands with fond memories.

To get you started, we found five Hawai'i eco-voluntourism adventures offering visitors and residents great opportunities to give a little, and gain a lot. If you're ready for some Island-benefitting green work, read on!

VOLUNTEERING ON VACATION MAUI

Maui's Pacific Whale Foundation is dedicated to protecting whales, dolphins, coral reefs and other ocean life. Over the past three decades, it has hosted more than 3.5 million guests on its ocean eco-tours, says Anne Rillero, the foundation's conservation manager.

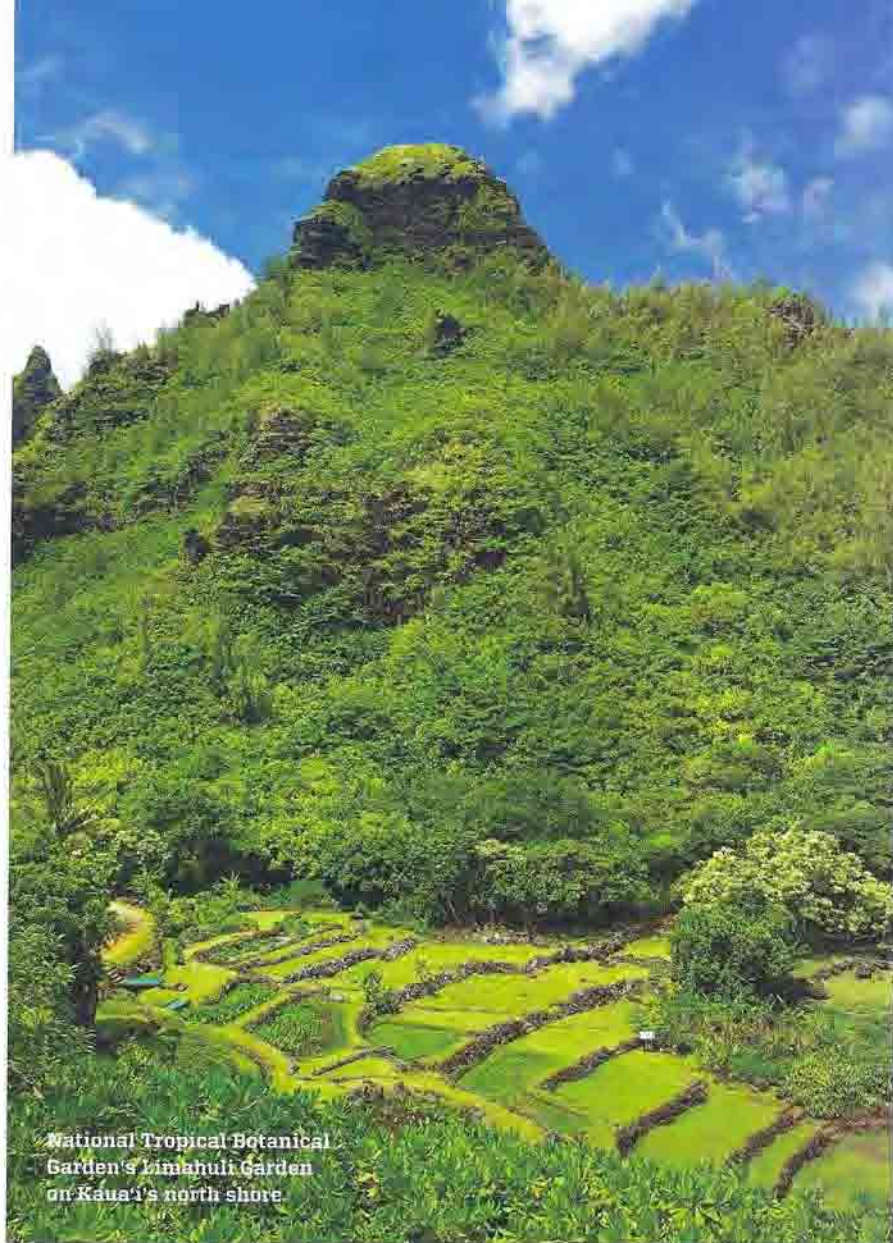
"When we take people out to see whales and dolphins, or to snorkel, or to watch the sunset on a cocktail trip, what we try to do is introduce people to the ocean, get them excited about it, and then we want them to think about conservation and how they can make a difference," Rillero says. The foundation's Volunteering on Vacation program, now in its fifth year, provides opportunities to dive into green-living activities. "When they see that it's fun, it's easy, it's satisfying, it's meaningful, maybe, when they go home, they'll get involved" with other planet-protecting endeavors.

HOW DO I START GETTING DIRTY?

Volunteering on Vacation whittles down your work plan to a few easy steps. First, check out the program's online calendar at www.volunteersonvacation.org. You'll find weekly group activities there as well as perks, such as an opportunity to work alongside an activity leader well versed in Hawai'i's geology, animal life and cultural history. When you're ready to sign up, call **(808) 249-8811, ext. 1**. Volunteering on Vacation partners with Haleakalā National Park and nonprofits such as the Hawaiian Islands Land Trust, which protects and restores Hawaiian cultural sites. You can also sign up for a solo activity. For a solo beach cleanup, you'll get Volunteering on Vacation trash bags, a marine debris tally sheet, gloves and instructions on disposing litter. Participation is free and, after completing three hours of work, you'll get a Volunteering on Vacation tote bag.

NATIONAL TROPICAL BOTANICAL GARDEN KAUAI

Dedicated to saving and sharing knowledge about our planet's tropical plants, the National Tropical Botanical Garden's three Kauai gardens contain the larg-



National Tropical Botanical Garden's Limahuli Garden on Kauai's north shore.

est collection of native Hawaiian plant species found anywhere. Many of the plants in NTBG's gardens are threatened, endangered or have already disappeared from native habitats.

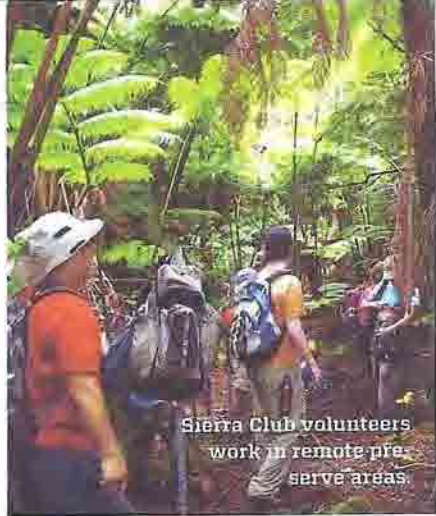
NTBG gardeners, most of whom were born and raised on Kauai, enjoy working elbow-to-elbow with volunteers and chatting about both horticulture and local culture, says Samara Kinkki, volunteer coordinator for NTBG's sites on Kauai's south and north shores. That's a bonus for many eco-voluntourists. "It can be hard to get in on local Hawaiian culture, if you're not from here," Kinkki says of the Islands. When a visitor asks, "What can I do to fit in (culturally)?" her standard reply is: "Well, go pull some weeds in the native section for a while. You'll be part of the family after not too long."

How can you be sure that, as an eco-

voluntourist, you're plucking invasive plants and not—yikes!—a rare species? "There's a lot of supervision," says Kinkki. "There's no way they (visiting volunteers) are going to have an opportunity to mess up," she says, laughing.

HOW DO I START GETTING DIRTY?

Contact Kinkki, preferably a few weeks before your arrival. **Send an email note to volunteer.ntbg.org**, or call Kinkki at **(808) 332-7324, ext. 228**. She'll ask about your interests and physical abilities. Assignments range from easygoing, such as potting plants in a shaded, cool horticultural center, to blood-pumping, such as rigorous treks along steep trails to plant native seedlings and remove invasive species. Participation is free. More information is available online at www.ntbg.org.



Sierra Club volunteers work in remote preserve areas.

FRIENDS OF HAWAII VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK BIG ISLAND

Sturdy walking shoes, long pants and a backpack filled with both sunny- and rainy-weather gear. That's what volunteers working with Friends of Hawaii's Volcanoes National Park bring to the group's monthly forest restoration projects. Working in areas beyond public-access boundaries, volunteers get hands-on education about environmental challenges facing the park, which is home to Kilauea, one of the world's most active volcanoes.

Between January and June of this year, Friends of Hawaii's Volcanoes volunteers uprooted 5,051 faya plants, 892 strawberry-guava trees, 42 blackberry plants and a few ginger plants—all invasive species known for crowding out native plants. They also planted native seedlings and collected native *māmane* seeds near the park's Mauna Loa Strip Road for nursery cultivation. Park resource managers are attempting to rebuild a *māmane* forest to improve habitat for endemic birds, such as the 'i'iwi. Julie Mitchell, general manager for the Friends of Hawaii's Volcanoes, says the restoration projects give visitors "a chance to get to know a place in a more intimate way, and feel like they're doing something good."

HOW DO I START GETTING DIRTY?

To preregister for participation in a restoration project, send an email note to volunteer@fhvnp.org, or call (808) 985-7373. More details, such as age restrictions linked to some projects, are available online at www.fhvnp.org. Volunteers should be able to hike at least a mile over uneven terrain and through brush in areas with moderate slopes.

SIERRA CLUB SERVICE PROJECTS BIG ISLAND, MAUI, O'AHU

Looking for more than a single day of eco-voluntourism? The Sierra Club's Hawaii Chapter-O'ahu Group organizes three-day service projects over long holiday weekends. The projects take volunteers into preserve areas on Maui and the Big Island for two days of work and a third reserved for hiking or other education- and recreation-related pursuits. This fall, a service project slated for Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge on the Big Island—home to endangered Hawaiian birds—will focus on planting native *koa* trees and greenhouse work. These are small tasks that require no special skills. But don't lose sight of the big picture. This work helps U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service managers and scientists move forward with construction of sea-to-mountain, native-vegetation corridors for birds migrating along the slopes of Mauna Kea.

Volunteers will stay in a rustic cabin,

where prep and cleanup of shared meals will be a team effort. Free time will likely be spent exploring a *koa* 'ōhi'a forest in search of rare birds. Deborah Blair, a longtime Sierra Club volunteer and leader, says the projects are fun. "You get to go into places you normally don't have access to," as well as see and take part in something that's "out of the ordinary." Through eco-voluntourism, she adds, "I like to think that I'm doing something that future generations can enjoy and appreciate."

HOW DO I START GETTING DIRTY?

Go to www.hi.sierraclub.org/oahu and submit an application. There's a fee of about \$85 to participate—covering meals, lodging and ground transportation, but not airfare to the project island. Blair recommends applying months in advance as each service project is limited to about a dozen participants. Looking for single-day projects? The Sierra Club's O'ahu Group also puts together cleanups along Ala Wai Canal, near Waikiki, and at Sandy Beach, near the island's

southeastern tip. Check out online calendar listings at www.hi.sierraclub.org/oahu. Participation is free for single-day projects, with no advance notice required.



Volunteers clear reef-choking invasive algae with Mālama Maunaloa.

Friends of Hawai'i Volcanoes
National Park plant native
seedlings and collect seeds
for nursery cultivation



PRESERVE HAWAII' & OTHER ECO-VOLUNTOURISM OPPORTUNITIES O'AHU

After writing her book, *Preserving Paradise*, Kirsten Whatley created “Preserve Hawai’i,” an online resource for visitors and residents looking to do green volunteering. The website’s O’ahu calendar includes ongoing opportunities and special events with a number of environmentally conscious community groups. Be aware, however, that getting involved with some of the calendar offerings may call for more initiative on your part. Paepae o He’eia, which takes care of He’eia Fishpond—created by *ali’i* (chiefs) more than 600 years ago—limits worker slots, which can fill quickly with local residents who want to lend a hand. Other groups, such as Mālama na Honu, on O’ahu’s North Shore, ask for monthly commitments. Mālama na Honu volunteers serve as guardians for about two dozen *honu* (green sea turtles) that turn up nearly every day on Laniākea Beach. Federal

law and hefty fines for violators protect the honu from any sort of harassment. Volunteers set up basking perimeters around the honu and educate visitors on how to protect the threatened animal. Other community-based groups, such as Mālama Maunalua, offer intermittent eco-volunteering opportunities. In June, the group, along with its conservation and science-focused partners, announced completion of a project called “The Great Huki,” through which 3 million pounds of reef-choking invasive algae were cleared from 26 acres of southeast O’ahu’s Maunalua Bay. (*Huki* translates from Hawaiian as “pull.”) An estimated 3,000 community members and hundreds of Hawai’i schoolchildren pitched in as volunteers for the project over a span of about two years. Got a good pair of reef shoes? Plans for further removal of alien algae and bay restoration are in the works.

HOW DO I START GETTING DIRTY?

Preserve Hawai’i’s online O’ahu eco-volunteering calendar is at www.preservehawaii.org. Find more details about Paepae o He’eia’s projects at www.paepaeohecia.org. For information about Mālama na Honu, visit the group’s website at www.malamanahonu.org. More details about Mālama Maunalua are available online at www.malamamaunalua.org, or call (808) 395-5050. †