

# Keepers of Mākua



*Images by John Hook*

It's early morning in Mākua on O'ahu's west side, and rain lingers in the valley that rises behind the beach. Out at sea, skies are beginning to clear. A small crowd of people are scattered along the water's edge, scanning the bay for the sleek curve of a dorsal fin, or a burst of fine mist coughed into the air. Micah Doane approaches the crowd with a customary head nod and "howzit." In a T-shirt and boardshorts, he looks like any other guy preparing for a morning dive, save for the laminated sheet of paper he holds in his hand. "You guys here for the dolphins?" he asks.

Doane is the co-founder of [Protectors of Paradise](#), an informal group of divers and community members who have stepped up to mālama, or care for, this stretch of the Wai'anae Coast. "We're out here today making sure

people know that interacting with dolphins can be really bad for them," Doane says. The paper he is holding has a graphic depicting how the marine mammals rest: They dive and surface in sync with their pod, their eyes still open though half of their brains are turned off.

Mākua Beach has become famous for the dolphins that visit its waters. "[They] come into this bay to sleep, but with so many people and tour boats chasing after them lately, it's disrupting their resting habits and might be making them less fit to survive," Doane explains. He and other Protectors of Paradise volunteers spend as many mornings as they can educating divers and tourists on dolphin behavior, and documenting interactions that may put the aquatic mammals at risk. It is just one among a variety of activities they've undertaken to meet the area's growing needs.

Doane can date his ties to Mākua as far back as the late 1800s. His paternal great- great- grandmother, Malaea Naiwi, moved from Hawai'i Island into the community of Native Hawaiians who farmed and fished in the area. In the 1940s, the U.S. military evicted the population in order to clear the valley for live munitions training. Cultural sites were destroyed and forests burned. Rooftops of family homes and the neighborhood church were painted with white X's, then used as target practice for aerial bombardment. "The only land they didn't touch was the cemetery by the beach, but you can see bullet holes and chunks missing out of the grave markers," Doane says.



Through the decades, where the valley meets the sea, some Native Hawaiians continued to live in an encampment that they referred to as a pu'uhonua, or place of refuge. Subject to the threat of eviction, its size fluctuated into the late '90s, but the presence of this insular community kept the number of visitors low. While the valley was off-limits, the beach was still a primary place where families went to gather food from the sea.

Doane, too, maintained his connection to Mākua. "Because this place is so isolated, there's always been a lot of illegal dumping going on here," he explains. As a child, he and his family regularly drove out from Pearl City to do beach clean-ups and to tend the community cemetery (a task now carried out primarily by Uncle Moku Neil, whose family also hails from Mākua). "Having those ties with the area and being raised by descendants of Mākua instilled in us to take care of our land and resources," Doane says.

The pu'uhonua at Mākua Beach came to an end in 1996 after a sweep by the city. Over the last few years, Doane has seen a massive surge in the

number of visitors, and subsequently, the amount of trash, on the beach at Mākua, which is part of the Kā'ena Point State Park Reserve. "As social media became more popular, this place became famous for underwater photography because of its crystal-clear waters and the dolphins," he says. As the number of visitors skyrocketed, spontaneous beach clean-ups were no longer adequate, and Protectors of Paradise was formed. "With each Instagram post, the influx of people grew," Doane says.

That inundation hit a high point in summer 2016, when thousands of people flocked to Mākua over the Fourth of July weekend. By Sunday afternoon, trash was piled high along the beach. With no facilities onsite, some overnight campers dug latrines in the brush, provoking fears of water and soil contamination. This incident, and others like it, highlighted the state's neglect of this stretch of coast—there is only one Hawai'i State Parks maintenance worker assigned to Mākua and neighboring Keawa'ula, also known as Yokohama Bay.

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When the weekend ended and the campers dispersed, Protectors of Paradise showed up to pick up the slack, filling trucks with collected waste and debris. Since then, the group's members have been working to help the community and state find a resolution to this growing problem. "It's not just the trash," Doane says. "It's people abusing the wildlife, turtles getting caught in nets, water getting polluted. There's unexploded ordinances and maybe even depleted uranium in the valley—the result of military training. It's one side of the island that gets the last say in anything. It's been the last priority."

Paradise or otherwise, Mākua has seen its fair share of abuse over the years. But there have always been the quiet few who have worked to

protect it. For Doane, there's hope in that. "If a few people could have an impact," he says, "imagine what a whole island could do."

*For more information about Protectors of Paradise, follow them on [Facebook](#).*

*This story is part of our [The Good Life Issue](#).*