NOAA
Habitat
Blueprint

NOAA Selects West Hawai'i as Habitat Focus Area

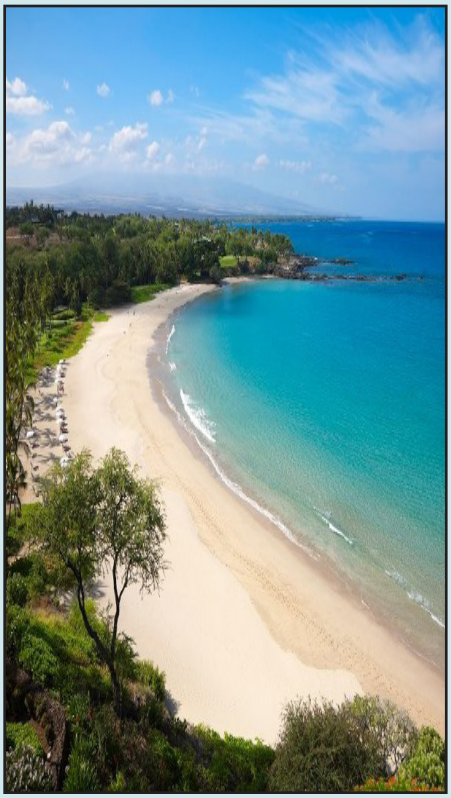
West Hawai'i on Hawai'i Island has been selected as one of two Habitat Focus Areas in the Pacific Islands region under NOAA's Habitat Blueprint Initiative. The initiative provides a forward looking framework for NOAA to think and act strategically across programs and with partner organizations to address the growing challenge of coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation.

The Hawai'i Island Paradise

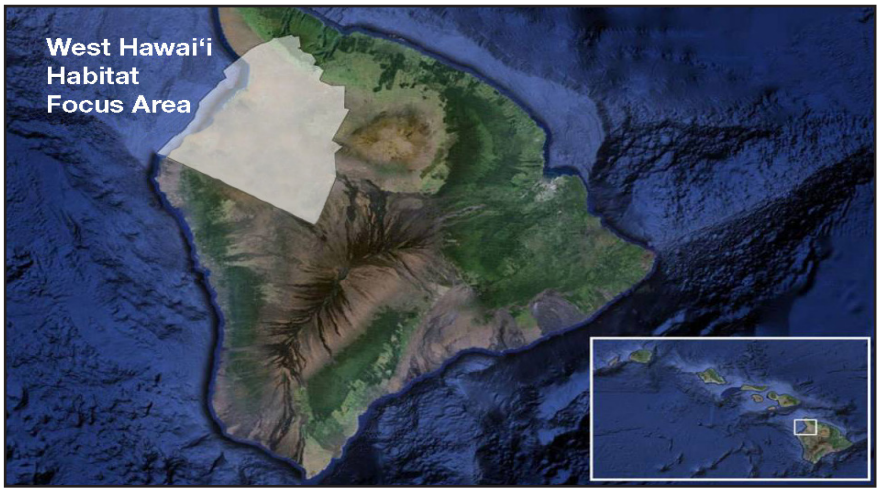
Known for its clear waters and coral reefs, the West Hawai'i Habitat Focus Area is located on the north western coast of Hawai'i Island.

There are several marine and cultural resources of concern in the area that are important to Hawaii's economy, culture, and environment. For example, West Hawai'i contains one of the longest contiguous coral reefs in the state. Nearly a quarter of the corals and fish that live along this coast are found nowhere else in the world. The area is also home to several endangered or threatened species such as Hawaiian monk seals (īlio holo i ka uaua), humpback whales (Koholā), and green sea turtles (Honu), and the coastal zone includes Hawaiian fishponds and the highest concentration of anchialine pools in Hawai'i.

In household surveys, communities have identified their most important conservation concerns as protection of: coral reefs and wetland habitats; predators, and; food species (such as parrotfish, octopus, and lobsters).



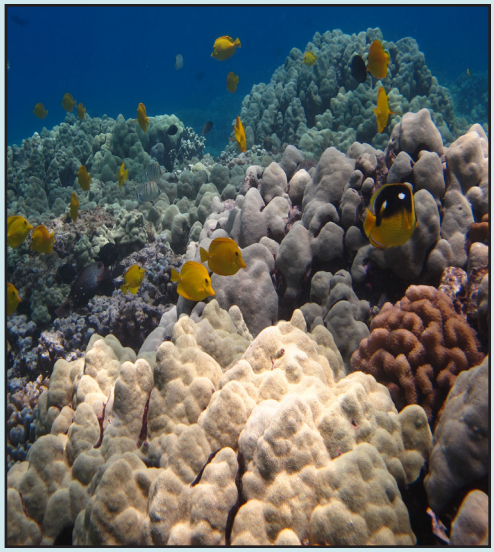
Mauna Kea Beach South Kohala, West Hawai'i



A Habitat in Need

West Hawai'i's unique marine resources face a growing threat from uses both on the land and in the sea. The area is experiencing one of the fastest growth rates on the island. Coastal development and other potential stressors including runoff and other sources of land-based pollution, recreational and commercial overuse, invasive species, and climate change threaten marine resources. Together these impacts can negatively impact the coastal and marine resources that many communities depend on.

With growing partnerships and collaboration, West Hawai'i can find that delicate balance of supporting a healthy economy while continuing to preserve and restore the marine resources.



Coral reef habitat
Photo by Chad Wiggins

Puakō/Wailea Bay
Photo by Sierra Tobiason

Collaboration

The West Hawai'i Focus Area has merged with the NOAA designated Hawai'i Island Sentinel Site to form a single initiative working to improve habitat and community resilience to climate change and other threats.

The location also includes the State of Hawai'i and NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program South Kohala Priority Site, as well as the waters of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, the Kona Integrated Ecosystem Assessment, and the NOAA Recovery Act Pelekane Bay Watershed Restoration site. Communities in the area are actively partnering with various organizations and agencies to host regular coastal marine debris clean ups, invasive species removal efforts, and a range of activities including re-vegetation and erosion control in upland areas that fall within the strategies of the area's Conservation Action Plan. Through partnerships with communities, businesses, agencies, and organizations, there are regular opportunities offered to help train volunteers, staff, and community members on rules and biological and human use surveys, as well as reef etiquette, land use best practices, outreach, and education.

Examples of Partners

State of Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources
State of Hawai'i Office of Planning
National Park Service
The Nature Conservancy
Kohala Center
University of Hawai'i Sea Grant
Community Groups including at Ka'ūpūlehu, Kīholo, Puakō, Kawaihae
Kohala Watershed Partnership
U.S. Geological Survey
Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System
West Hawai'i Fisheries Council

Focus Area Objectives At a Glance

3-5 years

Prevent, reduce and quantify the effects of discharge of land-based pollutants, such as sediments and nutrients, to coral reef ecosystems

Provide data and develop tools to better understand and adapt to localized climate change effects and impacts

Build community and local capacity to better understand and manage coastal and marine resources

Longterm

Improve coral reef habitat, foster the wise use of marine resources, and improve local capacity for future management.