

KALALAU TRAIL, A HIKER'S PERSPECTIVE
PART 1, TRAIL CONDITIONS BEFORE
VOLUNTEER SUMMERS

by

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DRAFT 3-07 (NEW: DRAFT II, 5-08)

INTRODUCTION: *The italics throughout are new additions as of 5-08. After the first part of the intended three-part series was published (abbreviated, with no photos), a local man named Mack Horie approached me about the trail. He told me he had been responsible for the trail for ten years and that during that time the trail had never been closed because of danger or poor trail conditions. He was shocked to see photos of the present condition of the trail.*

This is a three-part series on the Na Pali coast and Kalalau. The public usually only gets one-sided, official reports in the news. This series is intended to balance the picture. I feel privileged to hike this beautiful trail nearly every month.

Kalalau is a world-class nature destination of unsurpassed and unique beauty. It's features include pristine beaches, many thousand-foot high spires and cliffs, an arch (Honopu), several spring-fed waterfalls, caves, breathtaking views, rare endemic species, many archeological sites, rare birds and drinkable streams. There are more endangered species per acre in the Pali than in any comparable acreage anywhere on the American continent. Kalalau is so beautiful that it is easy to fall in love with the world here. Kalalau is unique, vulnerable and so exceptional that it calls for respect and visionary care. The 11 mile trail leading to Kalalau is historically significant, including archeological artifacts, spanning hundreds of years of use. It deserves our immediate consideration as well as heritage status. It has become a favorite for hikers from all over the world.

A neglected trail, however, can and has resulted in injuries and death, no matter how many disclaimers are posted. The trail is in need of restoration. Thereafter, some rigorous and periodic maintenance is essential to prevent unnecessary accidents and bring the trail up to its world reputation. Many visitors are drawn to Kauai by its natural beauty, its trails and camping opportunities.



In this three-part series I am addressing Trail Conditions (this editorial, Part 1), Enforcement (Part 2) and New Opportunities (Part 3). This is a public park; these are community issues, not just Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) issues. It is not my intention here to blame or complain, which is counterproductive and only leads to division and entrenched views. But accurate reporting is an essential starting point to finding pro-active win-win solutions. That is the purpose of this series.

THE TRAIL: According to Uncle Samson Mahu'iki, whose family was the last to leave Kalalau, when the DLNR took over the stewardship of the Na Pali Coast from the Robinson family in the middle of the twentieth century, the trail leading to Kalalau was well maintained and wide enough to accommodate loaded mule trains passing each other periodically. The stonework and trail cuts of the original Robinson trail are still visible in many places, but the trail has deteriorated so badly that now the trail vanishes completely in some sections, or it is less than a foot wide and slanted. (I wonder if there ever was an agreement when DLNR took over from Robinson that the trail would be maintained in good repair?).

Over the last 5 years especially the trail has deteriorated dangerously.

A safe trail is one that, like a highway, has a relatively flat bed laterally (side-to-side), resulting from a cut out of the hillside. Therefore, whether the trail goes up or down, the footing is still safe. A trail cuts artificially across natural erosion features that are constantly moving with gravity to reclaim their original profile. Goats accelerate erosion and open up raw earth that slides down, burying the trail.

There are five main types of deterioration on the trail. In descending scale of danger they are: dirt cones, lateral trail sloping, trail pukas, encroaching brush and gullyng. All but encroaching brush are erosion phenomena and all erosion gets worse in the rain and causes the trail bed to slope laterally.

Dirt cones become especially dangerous in wet weather when they are steep and slippery. Yet, they are the easiest to deal with and maintain. Policy is evidently lacking, possibly because the problem has not been defined properly, and possibly because of a disconnect between DLNR management and actual trail conditions or maintenance crews. The trail conditions are now so critical that I feel motivated to warn people publicly. My hunch is that the administration in Honolulu or Lihue don't have any idea of the actual trail conditions. This series may help.

Low maintenance is also causing environmental problems, such as gullying, rerouting of the trail and illness (spreading of infection in trail overgrowth).

Dirt Cones: These cones result when sliding dirt funnels through a narrow opening onto the trail and builds up as cones with an incline similar to the steepness of the traverse they occur on. The hiking trail is then forced up one side of the cone and down the other. As can be seen in the photos, some of the inclines are around 40-50 degrees and the crumbly dirt cones are treacherous even in dry weather. But when it rains, the dirt turns to slick volcanic mud and even the goats slip off. Other photos show numerous slip marks from boots. If a hiker slips off the trail during these conditions and over the vertical Pali below, there is a likelihood of injury or death. Dirt slides downwards spontaneously because the slope is so steep. Many conditions could result in a fall off the trail: over-exhaustion, strained ligaments/muscles, rain, excessive wind, an over-heavy pack, poor health, poor preparedness, poor visibility conditions (dawn, dusk), distraction, hypothermia (rain), vertigo, poor eyesight, improper footwear, improper medication or drugs, inattention etc. The hiker could be over the edge in a second. A heavy pack brings a hiker down very fast. Fatigue is likely. The 11 mile trail encompasses a total of 5000ft. ascent and 5000ft. descent. Knees are likely to be wobbly. I have included the view from the peak of the cones down to the ocean just below the recorded dirt cones.



Until about five years ago, the cones were maintained and broken down by trail crews. Now they are essentially unmaintained and have grown to their maximum height. There are about 7-10 dangerous cones. All could be broken down in three days by a

crew of four people. *Volunteer stone mason, ex Marine and Desert Storm veteran Bill Summers has done just that since this paper was written. More about Bill later.*

There are two sections of trail where steep cones are particularly dangerous: the traverses at mile 9.5 (approach to Red Hill) and mile 7.75 called "Chivalry Pass" (ie. "Please, ladies go first!") aka. "Terminal Traverse". One person has been known to slip off and survive. She had to be rescued by her husband, a captain on one of the cruise boats. How many "missing hikers" have met their fate here, never to be seen again?

We are reminded about David Boynton's tragic recent fall off a Na Pali trail further south. David was a friend of mine, and his passing is part of my motivation to improve trail conditions on the Kalalau Trail.

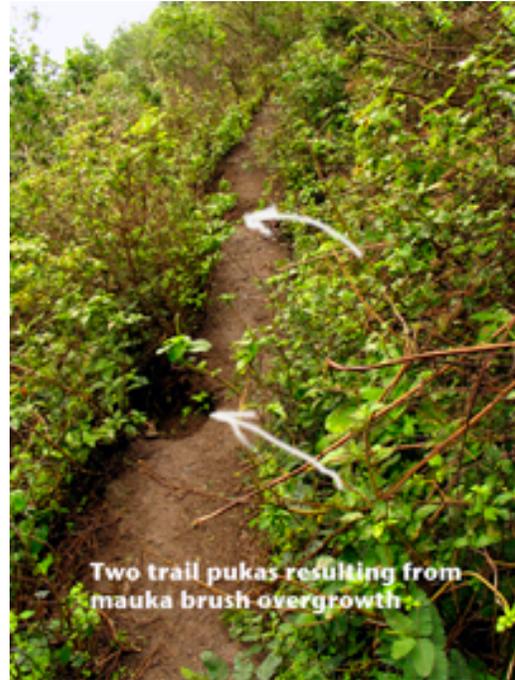
The safest way to deal with dirt cones is to build a retaining fence with heavy galvanized horizontal mesh a few feet below the cone. Sliding dirt becomes an asset as it accumulates in the mesh and will create a new trail bed. Meantime the mesh will also save slipping hikers. *NOTE: Stone Mason Summers prefers no artificial materials in the wilderness. He has proven that even these most dangerous sections of the trail can be restored and maintained by hand, lots of labor and some simple tools. Summers is as efficient and careful as a martial artist. He is alone so he has to consider the effectiveness of his every move. He works close to peril every day. Who else but an ex Marine/stone mason? Alternately, break them down to horizontal (original) trail level from either approach to the cone. Furthermore, where there are known dirt cones, the trail should be made extra-wide, which allows for non-critical buildup of sliding dirt and less frequent maintenance. Surely, if management understood the real conditions on the trail, these cones would be carefully removed and monitored frequently. There seems to be minimal supervision of trail conditions at present (NOTE: This written 03-07. What used to be the most dangerous portions of the trail are now safe and well-maintained).*

Lateral Trail Sloping: This problem is closely related to dirt cones, except that the sliding dirt is not funnelled onto the trail in one spot, but comes down as a sheet onto a whole section of trail. If the original lateral horizontality of the trail is not maintained by crews, the lateral sloping of the trail begins to approach that of the natural slope. (See photos of some typical trail sloping and a "vanishing trail" under a dirt slide). Trail sloping occurs all along the trail in short sections, but is most critical after mile 6. It requires either cutting



steps if steep, or levelling the trail bed or both. This is a less critical, but a more time-consuming project than clearing dirt cones.

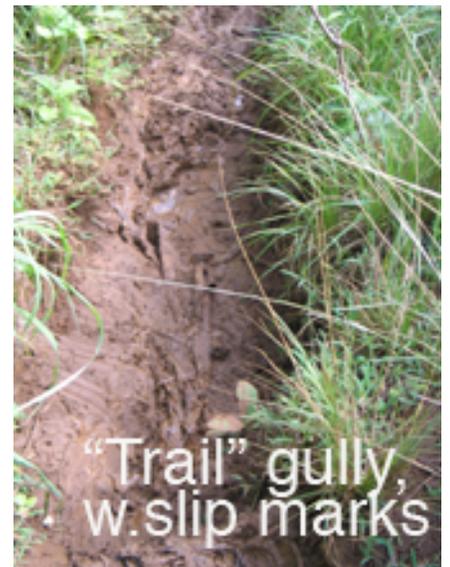
Trail Pukas: Holes on the makai side of the trail are typical phenomena resulting from undermaintainance. There are about 20 serious pukas and at least 100 more growing ones. They result primarily from brush overgrowth on the mauka side of the trail, which results in hikers being pushed onto the makai shoulder of the trail, breaking it down. This is a typical example of neglect in one area causing spinoff problems in another. Likewise, it also shows that it is cost-effective to control a small problem to avoid it becoming a larger one.



Brush can also hide pukas, making them quite treacherous. Pukas also result from water erosion gradually cutting into the path and weak spots of soil. A sloping trail will encourage hikers to slip into the puka and off the trail. In at least four places along the trail there is evidence that hikers have slipped overboard into the weeds/underbrush (please see photos).

Trail pukas can be remedied by radically cutting back the mauka brush and widening the trail on the mauka side. If that is not possible, a retaining stone wall has to be built from below the trail to shore up the weak or missing shoulder.

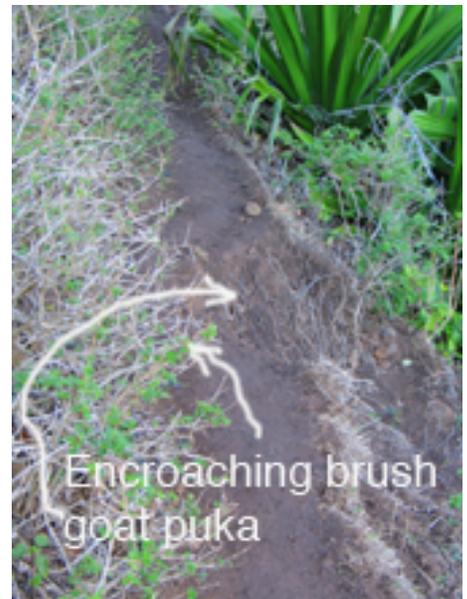
Gullying: If drainage is not maintained, gullying is a likely result (see photos). Gullying is most severe between miles 1-2.5, where the trail turns into a deep, slippery, muddy gully and an artificial stream 1/4mi. long after rain. This could be remedied by cutting periodic lateral drainage ditches. The dangers are steep, slippery slopes that cannot be avoided. In several places gullying has resulted in new detour paths being created by hikers (photo). A drainage specialist from the mainland was hired by Parks several years ago, but no solution resulted on the ground. All that money spent could have been used on common sense trenching where the water can harmlessly dissipate in the vegetation to prevent the artificial stream from



further eroding the gully. This is also an example of a compounding error that could have been avoided with a small amount of early drainage control. It shows also the disconnect between administration and the facts on the ground.

In February a man broke his leg (compound fracture) on the muddy section of the trail to Hanakapi'ai. A witness said he lay there in extreme pain for hours before help could be summoned. Less dramatic falls occur daily in wet weather. According to a survey conducted by Dr. Ray Chuan several years ago over a period of three weeks, there were an average of 260 hikers per day on this section of trail. By now the number has surely gone up. Are these trail conditions the aloha we extend to our valued visitors from all over the world?

Brush Overgrowth: This problem gets considerably worse during the wet season. After the 42 day rain in spring 2006 the brush grew thick and tall, but was never cut back. In some places (mi.8) the lantana remains 8feet high. (NOTE: *This lantana and most other obstructing brush has been cleared by Summers in his adopted area: Mile 6.5 to Mile 9*). Some cutting was done by hikers. The dangers are several: further trail erosion/expansion as we have seen, poor visibility of the trail rocks, pukas or sloping, danger to eyes or snagged backpacks from low branches, and staff infection. It just takes one infected person to walk the trail to infect many more, if the brush encroaches onto the trail bed. Scratch marks on arms, legs and face are common.



Overgrowth is worst from mi. 2.5-3 and 8-9.5. Herbicides are ineffective, firstly because they wipe off on passing hikers, and secondly because the woody brush is not removed, leaving an ugly sight ; thirdly they are poisonous. Mechanical cutters and sweat are the best solution. Here also obviously, maintaining/ removing short succulent weeds is much more cost-effective than waiting until they become big and woody. Even though overgrowth is not as serious a danger as dirt cones are, maintaining it should be a priority to avoid all the compounding problems (pukas, slopes, visibility, staff infection, scratches, snagged backpacks and eye injury). I have developed a very effective brush tool made with a Japanese hooked pull blade and a four foot handle. It pulls through woody stems up to 1/2in. and chops through much bigger ones. A small camp saw and gloves are also very effective.

All five of these problems get worse during the wet season and after rains.

In general the trail conditions have been deteriorating since DLNR Parks started charging \$10/night for permits. The public expected improved services not worse. Where does the money go? As we shall see in Part 2 of this series, Parks is bullish on enforcement and slack on trail maintenance. Is that policy? Budget? Admin. oversight?

If Parks were to relinquish the responsibility of trail maintenance completely, it would rapidly be taken up by the primary users of the trail and result in better conditions. At present, much of the maintenance is done by hikers anyway. But more would be done if hikers knew that it was expected of them. Now people still expect DLNR to do the job. That may be unrealistic and remains a point of discussion. *(NOTE: This was written before Bill Summers ever got to Kauai. He claims to have never seen the article that ran in the paper before he got here).*

Ps. This report has a silver lining. Most of these shots were taken in November (2006). When I hiked the trail around Christmas I came across a volunteer who had spontaneously started fixing the trail. *(These volunteers were prior to Summers...but they show a significant trend that when conditions get bad enough, self-responsible adults roll up their sleeves).* By the time he and another hiker volunteer had finished, they had spent 48 hours making the trail safer in the most dangerous spots. Also a DLNR trail crew went through in February and did some significant work around mi. 7.5.

Self-responsibility and volunteerism is on the rise, especially where official services fall into neglect. This is a world-wide trend as our global crisis gets more acute. There is a great deal of good will and volunteerism on Kauai and in Kalalau, especially with hauling out of garbage, endangered species propagation, containing invasive species (running bamboo fi.), clearing fallen branches, trails etc. More on this in Part 3.
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Arius Hopman moved to Kauai from Maui end of 1992, to be close to the Kalalau Trail. The trail is his health insurance plan. He finds his energy drains down from being indoors. When he needs to charge up his batteries he hits the trail. He is a gallery owner, watercolorist and photographer in Hanapepe. For many more images of Na Pali and Kalalau, visit www.hopmanart.com

