

Towering Mauna Kea gets its own caretakers

□ Ranger-guides will keep watch, offer help both cultural, scientific

By Dave Smith
Tribune-Herald

There is a new presence atop Mauna Kea.

Visitors to the summit of the 13,796-foot dormant volcano may

notice new personnel keeping an eye on activities there.

Mauna Kea Support Services, which operates a visitor center at the mountain's 9,200-foot elevation, has two new employees working on the mountain.

The temporary hirings are part of a four-month, \$30,000 pilot program to determine what issues and challenges will be faced by the high mountain rangers.

Mauna Kea Support Services was contracted for the program by the Office of Mauna Kea Management, which was created last year as a condition of the Mauna Kea Master Plan.

The plan approved a year ago by the University of Hawaii Board of Regents called for the establishment of the ranger force and also established the Mauna Kea Management Board, whose appointed members advise the High-based Office of Mauna Kea Man-

agement. Kahu Ku Mauna, another appointed panel created by the master plan, is providing the board with advice on Native Hawaiian issues.

The new employees are tentatively being called "ranger-guides." Ron Koehler, director of Mauna Kea Support Services, described them as sort of a hybrid park ranger who will monitor sites and activities and provide information of a cultural and scientific nature.

Koehler said the rangers won't have enforcement powers and likely won't need them. He said there has seldom been a need for law enforcement on the summit, which depending on the type of incident is currently handled by either state enforcement officers or county police. However, the new rangers will keep track of any violations, Koehler said.

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"Generally speaking there are not a lot of instances where you need an enforcement officer," he said. "Just the presence of an uniformed officer and a state vehicle could deter illegal activities."

For now the ranger-guides, which started work June 8, will operate out of the Onizuka Center for International Astronomy Visitor Information Station at Hale Pohaku. "The first priority will be to assess issues and areas of concern facing the rangers. A survey of visitors to the summit to determine the number of people and types of activities in which they are involved will likely be done," Koehler said.

In recent years there has been a clash between scientific, cultural and recreational inter-

ests on the mountain. The plan approved last year, an update of the original 1983 master plan, is designed to coordinate those interests.

The new rangers will go a long way toward that, said the Sierra Club's Nelson Ho.

Ho said the rangers, which he described as "10 years in the waiting" would provide a valuable service by informing visitors about the need to protect cultural sites.

"I'm glad there will be a presence focused on interpretation and culture," he said.

According to the Office of Mauna Kea Management, eventually six rangers will be hired to ensure that at least two will be on duty on the mountain during daylight hours.

Their roles will include monitoring of maintenance and construction work involving the 13 telescopes atop the summit — up to three more are allowed in the master plan — as well as commercial tour activities.

Koehler said among other things, the rangers will help ensure that construction crews keep the area clean.

Trash left from work sites was among the concerns expressed by the Sierra Club and other critics — including some practitioners of Native Hawaiian culture — of the way the state has managed the mountain.

A 1998 report by the state auditor said the university and the state Department of Land and Natural Resources has been lax in its management of the

historic and cultural resources of the mountain.

He said the rangers will also provide information about health concerns relating to high altitudes of which visitors are often not aware.

The rangers may be a precursor to the establishment of a kiosk on the summit access road where visitors would be stopped and provided information.

Ho said the Sierra Club is worried that a kiosk will be the first step toward the charging of fees to go to the summit which might discourage visits by island residents. He said the club opposes such entry fees.

"This is a public road," Ho said. "(Fees) are the beginning of the alienation of the public and the Hawaiian nation."