Of People and Place
Kipahulu Ohana offers a glimpse of ancient East Maui with its activities in Haleakala National Park near Hana.

by Cheryl Ambroziec

Visitors to the Kipahulu section of Haleakala National Park gather under the shade of the hale kua (Hawaiian house, above), where guides teach ancient weaving techniques (right) and how taro is grown (top).

The Kipahulu coastal area of Oheo, including the popular Pools of Oheo (opposite page), was added to Haleakala National Park in 1969.

Standing alongside the popular trail leading to the Pools of Oheo (aka “Seven Sacred Pools”) in the Kipahulu area of Haleakala National Park in East Maui, a 200-foot Hawaiian hale (house) commands visitors’ attention. The house is simple with a stonewall foundation and smooth, small, river-stone floor; sinuous oba log posts; ridgepoles and rafters lashed together; and a loslu (native fan palm) thatched roof. This hale kua (a Hawaiian house to store, display or trade) is an exact replica of the “little grass shack” that would have dotted this landscape before Capt. James Cook sailed into Hawaiian history in 1778.

Displayed under the shelter of the loslu roof is a variety of Hawaiian crafts and produce. Handmade lauhala (pandanu) fans and mats, coconut-leaf baskets, seed and feather lei, breadfruit, sugar cane, banana and coconut entice visitors. A Hawaiian woman extends a warm greeting of aloha. With her soft brown eyes, silver-threaded black hair and copper-colored kapa (wrap) tied over her shoulder, Tweetie Lind captivates the gathering audience, welcoming Haleakala National Park visitors into the hale kua to learn about Hawaiian culture.

Gathering with a group of hikers, I’ve come to Kipahulu to embark on a journey through time — past and future. On the first Tuesday of each month, a member of the Kipahulu Ohana leads visitors on the Kipahulu Interpretive Hike and Kapahu Living Farm Taro Patch Tour.
I will hike to sites representing several eras of Kipahulu history, ending at Kapahu Living Farm, where traditional lo‘i (irrigated terraces, especially taro) have been restored to active production. Tweetie, one of the co-founders of the obana (extended family/group) guides us. The hale, the hike and this cultural educational experience are available to the public because of the efforts of the Kipahulu Ohana, a nonprofit organization of Native Hawaiians determined to bring back the Hawaiian culture on this national park land.

**HISTORY COMES ALIVE**

“Haleakala National Park at Kipahulu has been transformed from a popular destination of waterfall-fed swimming pools into a destination where visitors can immerse themselves in Hawaiian culture,” says retired Haleakala National Park Superintendent Don Reeser.

Before Kipahulu Ohana’s involvement in the park, this landscape was an empty museum. Absent were the Hawaiians who once thrived in these lowlands for generations; only rock-wall foundations overtaken by cane grass and invasive species remained.

A visitor’s only exposure to Hawaiian culture was through the one-dimensional illustrations at the Interpretative Center in the park’s headquarters.

Working with Kipahulu Ohana founders John and Glenna Ann “Tweetie” Lind and Mike Minn, Reeser helped create a Living History program to educate people about the Hawaiian community that would have been found in this region between 1778 and 1884.

The Living History program illustrates how Hawaiians lived on a traditional ahupua‘a, a land-use system used by Hawaiians before Cook arrived. (In a more modern context, the concept of an ahupua‘a and a watershed are interchangeable.) An ahupua‘a followed natural geographical boundaries such as ridgelines and rivers, which ran from mountain to sea. Ideally, it would include within its borders all material required for sustenance — timber, thatching and rope from the mountains, various crops from the uplands, ka‘o‘o (taro) from the lowlands and fish from the sea.
HOME SWEET HOME

Ina Ue Keleui, E Pali O (When the heavens cry, I will protect you)
— the hale-builder creed

The hale kai (trading house) was constructed by master hale builder Francis Palani Sinenci, students from the Indigenous Hawaiian Architecture Hale Kahi O Hawaii certification program at Maui Community College and many volunteers from the Kipahulu community.

The Hale Kahi O Hawaii certificate program, designed by kumu (teacher) Sinenci, is the only traditional Hawaiian hale building instruction program in the state. Sinenci pioneered the introduction of building codes for indigenous architecture in Hawaii.

The program teaches students every step of building a traditional Hawaiian hale: layout and design, ground and site preparation, harvest and use of native wood, preparation of the wood, construction of platform/stonewall footing, post, planting, proper lashing, protocol and ceremony.

Students combined ancient and modern techniques to build the hale. Although they were allowed to use chainsaws and modern tools to cut the materials, the students had to measure the materials with their body parts and use the horizon as a level. They used nylon parachute cords instead of traditional sinnet to lash the roof arches and ridgepoles together.

In addition, other concessions were made because many of the trees and plants used in the traditional building are now rare and difficult to find. Traditional pili grass for the roof was replaced with a combination of loulou (native fan palms) and Chinese fan palms; rare ohia logs had to be shipped from the Big Island of Hawaii for the posts and rafters; and ironwood and inkyberry wood replaced ohia logs in parts of the hale's frame.

Although the students didn't complete the hale kai before graduating, many continued to volunteer their time and efforts to help the Kipahulu Ohana achieve its mission.

All members of society shared access to these life-giving necessities.

Haleakala National Park at Kipahulu is located within the Alaeiki ahupuaa. The Linds, Minn and Recser understood that reviving the ahupuaa in the park would provide a valuable educational experience for park visitors, as well as help support the Hawaiian community.

On the east side of Maui, a substantial proportion of Native Hawaiian families have lived in the remote Kipahulu district for generations. Their ancestors thrived here in a self-sufficient and sustainable lifestyle.

"The Kipahulu Ohana wants to help Hawaiians again achieve economic self-sufficiency," Minn says. "One of the goals of the Living History program is to provide opportunities for residents in the eastside Hawaiian community with jobs in farming, resource management and preservation on Haleakala National Park land. We're working to provide alternatives to
Co-founders of Kipahulu Ohana Tweetie and John Lind (middle and right) worked with master-builder Francis Palani Sinenci (left) to create the hale kuai.

hotel or service-industry jobs.”

As living descendent families that once lived on this land, the Kipahulu Ohana is determined to restore and transform the area of the national park into a showcase of their Hawaiian culture. Through the cooperative agreement, the Kipahulu Ohana works in partnership with park management to develop culturally based economic opportunities for East Maui residents, as well as to promote Hawaiian culture and conserve and restore the area’s natural resources.

Long prized for its fertile lands, lush forests and abundant ocean, this subtropical rain forest of Kipahulu valley is embodied by Hawaiians as a feminine life-giving garden. The abundant water pools and flows, caressing vegetation into never-ending blossom. Bud upon bud, the flora is in a constant state of fertility. The warm air swells in a bouquet of ripe fruits, tropical flowers and pungent soil. The succulence dilates the senses. The richness of nature is equally matched by the richness of the culture that once thrived in this area. It’s the ohana’s goal to nurture both.

As we begin our 1-mile hike up to Kapahu Farm, I feel like a kid on a treasure hunt as hints of the hidden past are revealed. Tweetie points out the waist-high crumbling rock walls playing peek-a-boo under layers of jungle foliage. These are the remnants of the Poonika family homestead foundation and animal pens — the last Hawaiian family that lived on this land in the traditional Hawaiian lifestyle in the early 1900s.

Stopping to observe George Kewalo Kanalulu’s 1920s restored, humble plantation-style house, Tweetie describes how the family collected alae (red clay) from the riverbed. With its high mineral content, Hawaiians prize the alae’s medicinal property. Tweetie shows us the remnants of a flume and dam built by the
The Kipahulu Interpretive Hike and Kapahu Living Farm Taro Patch Tour usually take place at 1 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month; call to make arrangements on other days. Participants meet at the hale kaiui (trading house) outside Haleakala National Park's Kipahulu Visitor Center, 10 miles west of Hana near mile marker 42. There is a $10 entrance fee per car to enter the park. There is no charge for the tour, but tax-deductible donations to the Kipahulu Ohana may be made after the tour.

Kipahulu is a three- to four-hour drive one way from Wailea, Kaanapali and Kapalua resorts.

Kipahulu Ohana: (808) 248-8973, www.kipahulu.org
Haleakala National Park: (808) 572-4400; www.nps.gov/hale

TOUR INFO

Kipahulu Sugar Plantation, which operated here from the 1870s through the 1920s.

FRUITS OF LABOR

Finishing a chapter of the past, we leave the covering of the forest to enter the clearing of the 5-acre Kapahu Farm. Here we begin to observe an illustration of the future.

Illuminated by the sunlight, the green heart-shaped taro leaves dance in the breeze with the pink dragonflies. Banana, breadfruit, coconut trees and sugar cane hug the edge of the loi. About two acres have been cleared, restored and returned to traditional organic production.

Bent over, knee- and elbow-deep in the water-filled taro patch, John, a traditional konabiki (caretaker) of this ahu'puanu, is tending to the plants. Standing to greet us, his smile beams through his thick silver beard as he lets out a big laugh and introduces himself as a "silver fox." Resting under the shelter of the farm's small hale, we get a chance to "talk story" with the obana's founders about their past achievements and their future goals.

As colorful as the landscape they've devoted to protect, the Linds and Minn have traveled parallel tracks as other 50-plus baby boomers. Activists at heart, they live what they believe; they believe what they live. Their effort to bring the eastside community together began 30 years ago.

"John is a natural organizer," Tweetie says, describing how he started the Hana Canoe Club in 1976. Forming the Hana District Pohaku in 1978, the Linds helped the community secure three long-term leases on state-owned land in East Maui to grow taro or provide other economic development.

Throughout the 1970s, the Linds and Minn actively protested to stop the Navy from bombing the uninhabited Maui County island of Kahoolawe. In 1979, John and Tweetie were asked to escort a group of Hana kapauna (elders) to the shores of the beaten-down island to view the devastation and begin a spiritual healing process.

They pioneered the first Hana Taro festival, an event that has grown into a successful springtime celebration of Hawaiian culture and agriculture. The festival provides a yearly economic boost for the eastside community. Today, the taro grown at Kapahu Farm provides poi for the event, now called the East Maui Taro Festival, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary on April 28-29, 2007 (www.tarofestival.org).

For the past 11 years, the Linds and Minn have focused on resurrecting the Hawaiian culture in Haleakala National Park. "We hope our efforts will serve as a model for other Hawaiians on how to work with the state," Tweetie says.

Incorporated in 1995 and granted non-profit status in 1997, the obana has introduced thousands of visitors and residents to the Hawaiian culture and resource management practices. Numerous schools from Maui and all over the world have visited the farm and participated in its development over the years. Kapahu Farm also serves as a community garden for local residents who want to work in the loi and harvest for their families for birthdays, graduations, weddings and funerals.

While the partnership with the park has been generally successful, challenges have arisen. Sometimes, uneducated visitors or park workers unknowingly tread on culturally sensitive areas. Last year, park trail crews built a public access trail to Kapahu Farm without consulting the obana or state archeologists before blasting stones, cutting down trees and blazing the trail through the farm. This makes John and Tweetie anxious, especially because the trail infringes on one of Maui's most sacred spots: Napua Heiau — the most powerful heiau...
(sacred place of worship) in Kipahulu, according to local Hawaiians.

The oba wants to teach people about this area's historical and cultural importance and not leave it up to a stranger's interpretation. "We believe it's best that only guided hikes be allowed in this sacred area," Tweetie says. "This land is where our ancestors worked and gave thanks. It's important that the message the public gets is accurate."

The trail has been closed to hikers not accompanied by a cultural interpretative guide. But with the tourist guidebooks describing the area as a "must-do" hike, it's difficult to control the curious wanderers. The oba is working with Maui's commercial hiking companies to facilitate guided tours. "We need to work together to perpetuate the respect and integrity this area deserves," Tweetie says.

The work of the oba is far from being complete, she adds. Their goals for the future include eradicating the exotic plants between the Kapahu Farm and the hale kua' i and replacing them with native, endemic and Polynesian introduced species. They are working with the Kipahulu Community Association to finish a certified commercial kitchen and agricultural processing center, which will serve as the facility to prepare food items from Kapahu for sale at the hale kua'i. They have their sights on developing a Hawaiian fishing village and camping area where canoe and other educational events could be held on one of their state-leased parcels of land. They also would like to build a caretaker cottage at Kapahu Farm.

Through their love of this land and their respect for their ancestors, Kipahulu Ohana has committed itself to putting Hawaiians back into the center of the park and back into the center of focus. "We want to bring back the old spirit to this land; it's all about keeping our ancestors' spirit alive," John Lind says. And because of their efforts, the more than 500,000 annual visitors to Haleakala National Park at Kipahulu now leave Maui with a new appreciation for Hawaiians. "This," John says, "is about helping Hawaiians survive."

Cheryl Ambrozic is a freelance environmental writer and photojournalist who lives on the Valley Isle of Maui.