

Outstanding Leadership Nomination for William and Melva Aila

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William Aila Jr met Melva Napua Kailikea as a teenager. When asked how he managed to get such an amazing wahine to go out with him, he replied “I stalked her until she gave in”. They have been married for 38 years and have two sons. Living on agricultural Hawaiian Home Lands in Waianae, William and Melva Aila are deeply embedded in a rural community that embodies traditional Hawaiian values – including the value of ohana. For William and Melva, environmentalism and cultural beliefs are intertwined and inseparable.

Their long involvement in community-based conservation issues including the controversial effort to protect the resources at Ka`ena Point and the creation of Papahānaumokuākea gave them real-world experience in protecting areas that have deep cultural importance as well as significant natural resource values. These taro-root experiences combined with William’s 24 years of experience working for DLNR as the Harbor Master in Waianae, allowed William to step into the role as the Director of DLNR, a critical conservation position in the state, with very little learning curve. His confirmation hearing generated 341 pages of testimony, 99% in support, including the favorable testimony of three previous DLNR Chairs.

“When you hear the term “aloha,” most think of love, affection and lots of warm fuzzy feelings. That’s only half the equation. Aloha also means respect. Respect for this sacred place and its natural and cultural treasures”

William Aila Jr

As DLNR Chair, William drew on his deep Hawaiian roots and values in nearly every aspect of his job and consistently tackled the toughest issues with poise and wisdom. He improved communications with communities to avoid confrontation on a variety of issues. He also improved partnerships with other agencies, private businesses, and the military. Melva played an active role throughout and became a regular presence in the department. Melva has a quiet demeanor ... but do not let that fool you; she is no pushover. She is the rock of the family, providing William with the encouragement and support that allowed him to be so successful in his all-demanding job as the Director of DLNR. She attends board meetings, legislative hearings, and international conferences, offering a constant calming influence over her husband’s feisty personality... and often finishing his sentences.

The Ailas recognize the important world-wide role that Hawaii can play by sharing with others the lessons we have learned here at home. In 2012, William went halfway around the world to participate in the Islands Bright Spots Summit in Hyderabad, India and in 2013 he helped develop Hawaii’s winning bid for the 2016 World Conservation Congress. In 2014 he participated in the World Protected Areas Congress in Australia and the United Nations meeting of Small Islands Developing States in Samoa. William has become a recognized leader locally, nationally and internationally.

William Aila led DLNR through many achievements, including:

- Bringing the 2016 World Conservation Congress to Hawaii
- Prioritized watershed protection through the Rain Follows the Forest initiative

- The first community based subsistence fishing area in Haena, Kauai
- A vehicle permit system at Kaena Point to reverse decades of resource damage
- A permit for commercial operations in state waters
- Streamlined permitting for restoration of Hawaiian fishponds
- Expanded Hawaii's Natural Area Reserve program, including predator proof fencing
- A conservation easement for undeveloped land at Turtle Bay
- Settlement of the long-standing Na Wai Eha case
- Increased enforcement and conviction of natural resource violations

William Aila is a stellar example of a devoted public servant who is committed to leadership. During his term as Chair of DLNR he arrived early and worked late, despite the long daily commute from Waianae-sometimes on little or no sleep. His unique open-door policy meant that he fielded phone calls, inquiries and complaints from constituents, lawmakers, and staff at all hours, every day of the year. With Melva's blessing, he had the main DLNR hotline routed to his personal cell on weekends so he could respond to the public even when no one was in the office. Most folks had no idea they were talking to the head of the department!

William and Melva have devoted their lives to the natural and cultural resources of Hawai'i. They eagerly embrace new conservation initiatives, especially those that give the people of Hawai'i a greater voice in natural resource management. They set an example of respect, cooperation, openness. Their enthusiasm and support generated a contagious energy that boosted morale throughout the department. They both refer to the last four years at DLNR as "the best time of our lives".