

State director Lea Hong connects land, people through The Trust for Public Land

By [Stephanie Salmons](#) – Reporter, Pacific Business News

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In 2006, Lea Hong was recruited from a career in law to become the Hawaii state director of The Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit organization that aims to create parks and conserve land for people, “ensuring healthy, livable communities for years to come.”

Before that, though, she had been involved in various conservation efforts, like providing pro-bono services to MAO Organic Farm and representing the state Department of Hawaiian Homelands in water rights litigation.

“Early in my legal career, I had also worked a few years for the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund in Hawaii on litigation involving water rights, conservation, and Native Hawaiian rights issues,” said Hong, who is originally from Wahiawa.

The mission of TPL’s Hawaii office is guided by a local board, which has representation from across the state.

“TPL’s work is important because of the unique and special relationship between land and people here in Hawaii,” Hong said. “TPL’s vision is that the people of Hawaii are thriving and healthy, and meaningfully connected to the land, each other, and a living Hawaiian culture. We accomplish this vision through our three programs: Parks for People, Sustainable Hawaii, and Aloha Aina.”

Hong said Aloha Aina aims to assist Native Hawaiian organizations in either regaining lands or facilitating their protection and stewardship of those lands; Sustainable Hawaii, which aims to protect “food, forests and water”; and Parks for People, which focuses on the activation and creation of parks in more urban settings.

“Our Aloha Aina program ... acknowledges the history of land loss that Native Hawaiians have experienced,” she said. “Protecting land and restoring lost connections to land, streams, springs, ocean waters and cultural sites can begin healing historical disconnections of people and land.”

But the protection of and reconnection to places of cultural significance not only benefits the Native Hawaiian community, but everyone in Hawaii, she said.

“Our other program, Sustainable Hawaii, is important because we all need clean drinking water (forests/watersheds), food to eat (agriculture/ranch lands), and healthy oceans/nearshore marine (fishing, recreation),” Hong said. “Our third program – the Parks for People program – is important because everyone deserves a close-to-home park or natural area to play, recreate, exercise, and enjoy for their physical and mental health.

“The Covid pandemic revealed how important our parks, natural areas and outdoor places are for our physical and mental well-being – and now, our mission is more important than ever,” she added.

What made you want to shift from your work in law to TPL?

I saw that there were limits to what litigation can accomplish, and it appealed to me that TPL’s methods of land conservation are completely voluntary – landowners must be willing to sell the land for conservation or willing to restrict the land from development. The process of conserving land is collaborative, community building, and many cases, can begin a healing process. Land conservation is also perpetual – so while the same issues can be litigated over and over, with land conservation – the land will not be developed.

What is your leadership style?

Collaborative, supportive, and problem-solving.

From a nonprofit perspective, how has Covid-19 affected fundraising and your overall efforts?

In some ways, it’s been very heartening in the sense that many donors are just very supportive of the mission of [TPL].

During Covid, I think there was a realization like, ‘the outdoors is my family’s place to go to be together safely, to recreate,’ and there was the sense of the importance of our outdoors and taking care of Hawaii’s special and natural places. And so, in some sense, that was very good, and we had a lot of donors who were very supportive and gave us financial support ... Covid has affected our outreach for sure in our community engagement.

It’s forced us to be a little more creative and expand our partnerships with different social service providers and different groups that are doing things in the park [as part of the Parks for People pilot project]. Covid has forced us to be, I think, more creative in our community engagement strategies in order to engage that demographic that may not have access to Zoom or Teams or what have you.

TPL just completed the acquisition of the Alakoko fish pond on Kauai – what’s next for the nonprofit?

As part of our new Parks for People program, we should be finishing up our grassroots community engagement phase in 2021, and transitioning to a community participatory design stage in 2022, going out to the community surrounding Aala Park to get their ideas on what types of improvements and activities/programs they want to see in the park.

We are also helping Hawaii Volcanoes National Park [on Hawaii Island] expand in Kau at Pohue Bay, and are working with Native Hawaiian community organizations, the state, county, federal agencies and private funders to protect land in Kaneohe and Maunawili.

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