4.0 FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

A total of 19 Molokini stakeholders participated in three separate focus groups including: commercial operators, government agencies, native Hawaiians, recreation interest groups, and environmental groups. The meetings were conducted on Maui in February 2009 and information gleaned from these sessions was used to inform site objectives, indicators, and future data collection efforts. Meetings were recorded on digital audio, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using content analysis.

4.1 COMMERCIAL OPERATORS

4.1.1 Perceptions of Current Conditions

Commercial tour operators who participated in the focus groups believed that Molokini is a good example of industry self-regulation that requires little outside intervention and is a model of diverse user groups coming together. They believed that Molokini could be a model for how things could be done elsewhere in the state, but it is important to look at what is working with the experienced operators. These operators cooperate to install and maintain boat moorings, and felt that they are doing a good job because the site is heavily used and coral is perceived to be healthy. Environmental compliance is self-regulated and education is provided to passengers (e.g., should not feed fish, cannot take shells, stay 15 feet off the shelf). Operators believed that Molokini has good visibility, unique topography (especially on the backside of the crater), and parts of the site are suited for adventurous types of people. For others, a trip to Molokini represents their first time in the ocean. Operators considered Molokini one of the more dependable locations where marine life is consistently good with dependable snorkel and scuba dive sites. They considered this site to be iconic to Maui and its proximity to this island is a lure.
Commercial tour operators argued that there has been a significant shift over time with increased safety, better training of staff, and integration of environmental and cultural education. Operators would like this to continue because they believed that education at Molokini translates to other areas. These operators believed that Molokini is a significant educational resource for the public and interactions with the marine environment at this site influence behavior at other locations in Hawai‘i and elsewhere. It was argued that Molokini is not the only place where operators go and educational messages that passengers receive at Molokini translates to other places. An example of this is fish feeding, which is thought to be absent at Molokini and reduced elsewhere because of educational messages by commercial operators. Operators stated that fish feeding did attract fish, but now there is a more balanced and diverse population even though the number of fish has reduced. Commercial operators mentioned that they provide oversight of uneducated people who visit Molokini. In operators’ opinions, the site receives fishing pressure at night from poachers, which would also occur in the day if not for the presence of tour boats.

Although there is a perception that every boat traveling to and from Molokini is full of tourists, commercial tour operators noted that they believed many local residents also access this site using tour boats because residents of Hawai‘i have been a significant group in many visitor counts conducted by tour companies. Most operators have some basic data about users and their experiences already, such as demographics, activity groups, and customer satisfaction. According to commercial operators who participated in these focus groups, ocean and geography dictate where certain boats can go and through trial and error, commercial operators have developed a system that they believe works. Private recreational boaters can disrupt this informal system at Molokini because they often
do not have enough information. On a summer day with a south swell, for example, the only place to go is Molokini and it gets crowded. By communicating and working together, tour boats can secure a particular spot, but unexpected changes, especially from private recreational boaters, can upset this system. There might be some misunderstanding between user groups, but it should not be adversarial, and other groups might be surprised at the level of integrity shown by commercial operators. Molokini accommodates many people and takes the pressure off other more sensitive coastal areas, but there is only a small window of opportunity of use from sunrise to one or two o'clock in the afternoon.

Operators identified distinct activity types at Molokini. Scuba divers go to deeper water where the diving is good based on experience. Snorkel boats, on the other hand, typically go to more sheltered areas that are more appropriate for novice recreationists. A few snorkel boats also offer scuba diving and vice versa because it makes sense economically. Most companies work well together regarding safety, and operators work cooperatively if an accident occurs. Passengers have an expectation that their trip will be safe and captains keep people together within set boundaries. People cooperate to make the trip to Molokini as safe and organized as possible.

4.1.2 Concerns and Desired Future Conditions

Commercial tour operators generally agreed with management objectives that support sustainable businesses, create quality user experiences, maintain a stable and healthy environment, and build respect for Hawaiian culture. Significant concerns were, however, expressed over several issues at Molokini. Commercial operators believed that state agency managers need to realize that operators have worked together independently from agencies to manage mooring schedules and other potential conflicts. Operators hoped that
agencies could be a partner to manage these moorings for the benefit of all, including private recreational boaters. Operators would like more cooperation and teamwork on this issue. These operators also expressed that additional moorings would be beneficial. They also would like improved communication between commercial tour operators and private recreational users. Information needs to be provided to the public about moorings and other formal and informal rules to help manage the heavy boat traffic at Molokini.

Operators felt that agencies do not understand that they provide most of the access to Molokini for local residents. It is difficult for locals to access many marine areas and operators thought that agencies should invest in facilities to support existing commercial operations that provide safe access for both locals and visitors. Commercial operators believed that they are part of the community and the industry is cross-cultural and cross-generational. They would like to get more respect from agencies for the benefits that they provide to the local community and state. Commercial operators also believed that the carrying capacity of Molokini is already informally established by harbor slips, infrastructure, and the limited number of permits. Some commercial operators, however, would like to find out more about customer experiences in the future, such as: (a) whether they get educated and are more aware of the environment and stewardship as a result of their trip, (b) if the provider is perceived by users to be knowledgeable of the environment, (c) how Molokini compares to other areas, (d) whether their experience inspires them to change future behavior or take further action, and (e) what made them choose to visit Molokini.

There have been incidents at Molokini and operators believed that the existing situation is overly punitive and driven by state agencies seeking sources of additional revenue. Some of the distrust in this area is hard to separate from problems related to management of
Molokini in general, but operators were concerned that large fines will result in less reporting of incidents. One option expressed was that fines should go back to rehabilitating coral on site and a reasonable restitution should be worked out. This may allow operators to work together to restore the coral because people want the coral back as soon as possible. Revenue from fines or restitution could also fund information provided to local recreational boaters on the rules at Molokini. Operators thought that the goal of fines should be to recover the resource and not generate revenue, and if the mandate is to protect the resource, money and energy should be directed toward this effort.

Operators would also like state agencies to be more forthcoming with their objectives so they can help with issues such as reef monitoring. Operators stated that it would be refreshing to be included in trying to achieve long-term objectives for Molokini, but before doing so, they would want to know what agencies are looking to achieve and why. Operators would also like less bureaucracy and inter-agency conflict among the various managing agencies because they believe this to be counter-productive and puts commercial tour operators in the middle. Finally, concern was expressed by several operators about the poor condition of the harbors and boat ramps, which they believed is inappropriate given the money that commercial tour operations at Molokini generate for local communities and the state as a whole.

4.2  COMMUNITY INTEREST GROUPS

4.2.1  Perceptions of Current Conditions

Participants mentioned that the water at Molokini is crystal clear and feels like an aquarium because the site is isolated from terrestrial and residential run-off. Water depth is also good and attracts large fish and other marine life, and the high diversity of substrate and
topography also make this site unique. Participants cited studies saying that the reef at Molokini is generally healthy and moorings have helped to improve reef health and safety. On the other hand, some participants believed that management has largely fallen to the Maui Reef Fund, which is a consortium that wants more sustainable marine tourism. Some state agencies are involved in this program. This group is attempting to establish a structured management program for the moorings, but there are only nine or 10 operators who contribute out of the 22 to 27 companies that currently have permits to visit the site. Participants believed, however, that management of moorings is working better than most things at Molokini. Native Hawaiians considered Molokini to be the piko (belly button) of a mythic being that runs between Maui and Kahoolawe, connecting the islands. There is no water or humans on the island and although this site was traditionally used for fishing, it is now a tourist spot. Participants have noticed a dramatic drop in fishing around Molokini despite it being so accessible from Maui. Participants discussed the different activities at Molokini and although the site accommodates many snorkelers and scuba divers, they believed that no major conflict occurs between these two main user groups because they are well divided with scuba divers visiting the outer reef and snorkelers remaining inside the crater sheltered from ocean currents and wind. They also mentioned that although there are many people visiting Molokini, this site has moorings and draws people away from other more sensitive sites that have no moorings and can suffer from anchor damage.

4.2.2 Concerns and Desired Future Conditions

Community participants generally agreed with management objectives that focused on maintaining a healthy environment, supporting sustainable businesses, creating quality user experiences, and building respect for Hawaiian culture. Some of these focus group
participants felt that there are not as many fish at Molokini as there used to be and this could be because they have often seen lights of fishing boats around Molokini at night. They have even seen people fishing from jet skis at Molokini. Participants believed that better education of users about the reserve’s perimeter, moorings, and why it is a preserve would help minimize fishing related problems. They also believed that although coral cover has increased at Molokini, fish diversity has decreased, suggesting that something strange is happening. They have noticed that fish feeding and its impacts are still occurring, which is difficult to stop completely without monitoring. One participant mentioned that fish feeding is evident because fish now bite and jump out at people, and more aggressive fish species are coming into Molokini on a more regular basis. Participants have noticed that the bird life on the island of Molokini is also changing.

Participants were concerned about management and enforcement at Molokini, especially issues related to size and capacity of boats. Participants also noted that there was no regulation on the size of boats allowed Molokini and that the only regulation involves the size of boat slip, which is why many boats are getting bigger by adding a second level (i.e., two-story boats). Allowing fewer visitors or boats at one time and permitting only smaller boats were supported. Another option raised in the meeting was to specify in the permit process that access would be regulated by time of day, but wind is a factor in the afternoon so boats typically visit in the morning. Participants applauded some commercial operators for setting boundaries and spatially separating use to minimize overcrowding. They also did not advocate any measures that would prohibit tourism at Molokini; they believed that the public needs a place to go and things to do, and Molokini is good for this because it is deep and the reef is largely protected, which minimizes potential environmental damage. One
participant noted that the music being played on the tour boats was distracting, could affect the bird populations, and should be limited with noise restrictions.

During this focus group, several participants believed that the community should be able to access Molokini more easily on their own because most residents avoid the area when use levels are high and the commercial boats occupy most of the moorings. Participants felt that more information on availability and location of public moorings is needed, and any non-commercial moorings should be submerged, color coordinated, maintained, and publicized only to non-commercial users. A locals day (i.e., once per month) was also supported, but weather could make it problematic in terms of equity. If a locals day was to be implemented, a proper public information and education campaign would be needed to raise awareness. Participants discussed that another option to increase resident access would be for tour companies to provide free or heavily discounted rates to local residents as a way to give back to the community.

Participants believed that there should be both a learning component and a cultural context to all tours at Molokini, and this area should be used for educating people about both the environment and Hawaiian culture. Participants believed that the area provides a Disneyland type of experience, and more could be done to inform visitors of its setting, history, and culture. Although respect for Hawaiian cultural practices is hard to reconcile with modern tourism, participants believed that measures could be taken such as showing respect by blowing the pu to let the ancestors know you are coming. Operators and their employees should also be trained in native culture and informed about things such as how to ask for permission and give back. Participants believed that someone should be required
to talk to tour boat crews or do a workshop on native Hawaiian culture that sets acceptable rules and cultural protocols to adhere to that are clear and truthful.

From a managerial perspective, participants expressed a desire for increasing collaboration among operators, agencies, interest groups, and other stakeholders. They believed that there is no communication, management plan, advisory committee, or strategy for what is happening on the islet. They also thought that it would be good if native Hawaiian councils and local families were more involved. Participants also wanted more commitment to research and ongoing monitoring of human use and biological indicators because there is limited data and only educated guesses on such things as the number of people visiting Molokini. Participants felt that any money collected for Molokini should go back to management and not to state general funds. Overall, these meeting participants believed that there is currently little management, planning, or money being used to take care of Molokini, and that protecting this conservation district and trying to run sustainable tourism while keeping the reef healthy is of the utmost importance. They would like to see less people, more fish, smaller vessels, dedicated funding for management, outreach that raises cultural respect and awareness, and more education that builds appreciation of the site as a marine protected area.