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Place

## Paradise Corrupted

BY PAULA NIXON

The brown tabby at my back door meows at me, demanding food. I am conscious of a warm breeze rustling the windmill palms as Todd, the outgoing resident of the townhouse, tells me that his daughter fed the cat during their four-month stay and named her Sherla. Out on the lanai, a smaller tabby has crept up behind Sherla; she doesn't make a sound, just stares with big green eyes.

I am staying at the Waikoloa Beach Resort (Waikoloa) on the sunny west coast of the Big Island of Hawaii, where development began in the 1960s. Today there are two large hotels, nine condominium complexes, two golf courses, two open-air shopping centers, and a gas station within the resort.

Rugged black lava flows dominate a landscape that has been softened with green lawns, monkey pod trees, and flowering shrubs. Yellow-eyed myna birds whistle from the treetops and trade winds carry the scent of plumeria blossoms. The crown jewel of the resort is Anaeho'omalu Bay (better known as A-Bay) with its half-mile-long, crescent-shaped, salt and pepper sand beach.

Waikoloa looks and smells and feels like paradise, especially when I am escaping winter in New Mexico, but the truth is more complicated.

Captain Cook anchored the HMS *Resolution* less than forty miles south of here in 1779. Cats hadn't arrived yet, but human beings had already begun to alter the fragile Hawaiian ecosystem. The native species that had evolved over millions of years were highly specialized and didn't have natural predators, so were unprepared for humans and the animals they brought with them. Endemic bird species were already becoming extinct and the pressures on their populations were about to escalate.

When I try to imagine what Waikoloa was like in Cook's time, it is easiest to do from a vantage point on the beach at A-Bay. The open air shower, concrete walks and interpretive signs disappear, as do the cats that live behind the beach in a colony maintained by volunteers. No infinity pools, paddleboards or golf carts.

What remains? The row of coconut palms swaying behind the beach, spouting humpback whales wintering in the warm waters just beyond the bay, and Mauna Kea with her head in the clouds reigning over the north end of the island. Also restored: the most unique feature of the coastline, anchialine or lava ponds, filled with brackish water and teeming with life. Once the cats are gone and the wetlands are brought back, the birds return. Black-necked stilts wade and feed in the lava ponds. Hawaiian coots build their floating nests with little risk of disturbance.

But reality is sitting on my lanai in the shape of two brown and gray striped cats. Less than one hundred years after Captain Cook's final voyage, Mark Twain arrived on the *Ajax* and sent a series of dispatches to the *Sacramento (CA) Union* reporting on life in Hawaii including the "...armies of cats,

multitudes of cats, millions of cats..." that he observed. No one knows when the first feline arrived, but once established they began to thrive and multiply in the temperate climate. Cats aren't the only predator threatening endangered birds, but they are the most visible.

I look closely at Sherla and her sidekick and see that neither one has a tipped ear to indicate that they have been captured and spayed or neutered. AdvoCats, a local feline rescue group, works tirelessly to trap, neuter, and return (TNR) as many felines as possible, contending that this is the only humane way to control the feral cat population. They coordinate their efforts with hotel managers, condominium associations, and homeowners to ensure that the cats are fed and watered daily. Bee Henderson, a long-time volunteer, tells me about a colony that she has fed for the last five years; all of the cats have been altered and the population holds steady at twelve and, with no new cats coming in, will decline over time.

Scott Fretz, Hawaii's wildlife program manager, listens politely when I tell him that AdvoCats has altered 10,000 cats on the Big Island, but he still objects to the managed colonies because "they hamper efforts to save endangered birds." Stilts, coots and other water birds nest on or close to the ground where their eggs and chicks are threatened by cats. Dr. Fretz says the only solution to the problem is for every cat to have an (indoor) home. Ms. Henderson's response is, "They think that if they don't allow feeding, these cats will go away. They won't."

I have explored the remaining lava ponds at Waikoloa hoping to see a coot or a stilt, but they are absent, moved on to less disturbed areas of the Big Island. Steve Hess, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Geologic Survey, says it's a chicken/egg question when I ask whether cats still threaten endangered species in the area since the endemic birds have largely disappeared. He says that if the cats were gone, "over time, birds would return." He is firm when he tells me, "They don't belong in the wild. They are predators to all water birds."

Sherla looks at me indignantly as I think about my options. I can call animal control and it's likely that within hours the cats will be euthanized. If I thought that would bring back one stilt or coot, I might consider it. Although I am doubtful that TNR alone will ever fully control the Big Island's feral cat population, I do know that I can make a small difference by making sure that these two are spayed or neutered.

I pick up the telephone and call Ms. Henderson. She agrees to help me capture the unaltered felines on my lanai, but won't be able to come over with her traps until later in the week.

Sherla gobbles the Little Friskies that I set out on a plate for her and then moves a few feet away to clean her paws and face. ■