



## EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

# Kupu's Conservation Leadership Development Program Case Study



BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

## Introduction

Kupu's Conservation Leadership Development Program, which started in Hawai'i and recently expanded into the U.S.-affiliated Pacific, was selected as one of the five programs to include as a case study for the AmeriCorps Climate Change Evaluation Bundle study given its focus on environmental stewardship.

During a 2-day site visit in January 2024 to Kupu, a researcher conducted individual interviews with:

- 2 program directors, and
- 2 program staff.

Two focus groups were held, one with three current members and the other with three alumni who are now Kupu staff. A researcher was also able to tour two of the partner host sites and informally converse with members.

Documents such as grant applications, progress reports, tracking data, and training materials were also collected and reviewed. These documents helped to better understand the activities and status of each program's work and provided a basis for corroboration with stakeholder perspectives gleaned through the interviews and focus groups.

## Description of Program and Context

Kupu, a nonprofit in Honolulu, HI, was established in 2007 by the chief executive officer (CEO), chief operating officer (COO), and one of its board members with a mission to empower youth to serve their communities through character-building, service-learning, and environmental stewardship opportunities that encourage *pono* (integrity) with *ke Akua* (God), self, and others. Two of the three founders were former AmeriCorps National service members. Kupu promotes sustainable practices, environmental education, and community engagement through hands-on experiences.

Partnering with more than 200 organizations since its establishment, Kupu operates numerous programs, two of which are funded by AmeriCorps:

1. Conservation Leadership Development
2. Hawai'i Youth Conservation Corps Summer Program

Previously, Kupu was also an AmeriCorps VISTA sponsor.

The focus of this case study is on their nationally-funded Conservation Leadership Development Program (CLDP). Recognizing challenges facing youth who want to enter conservation fields, entry-level experiences are provided to AmeriCorps members to prepare them for future careers. The program lengths are generally 6 and 11 months. Members may serve for up to two terms.

The program addresses the AmeriCorps focus area of Environmental Stewardship. In early 2024, Kupu was in its 3-year grant, and has a goal of having 235 AmeriCorps members who will remove invasive species, establish native vegetation, and remediate streams and trails at approximately 100 service sites. These service sites consist of federal, state/territory, and community-based nonprofit conservation agencies that manage parks and public lands in Hawai'i and in the U.S. Pacific Islands of American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI).

The climate change problems plaguing the region served by Kupu are well-known and documented in its logic model:

1. The area has unique and fragile native ecosystems and ecological services that are exceptionally vulnerable to decline and degradation results from invasive species, climate change, and natural disasters.
2. Invasive species are one of the most pervasive threats in the U.S. Pacific.
3. Excessive trail usage and a backlog of trail maintenance threaten user safety and damage sensitive natural environments.
4. The U.S. Pacific is susceptible to climate change impacts such as catastrophic weather events and wildfires.
5. General public information about environmental issues is limited.

Program staff and members shared several personal examples of how climate change has impacted them and their communities. One member explained:

*How does climate change not impact my life? It's everywhere. On a personal note, I come from a family of farmers, so we've all seen the impact of just all of it. Whether it's new insects coming to eat our farms or just temperature change impacting the growth of our plants. We hear all these stories from our parents and grandparents and aunties and uncles about how things used to be.*

Program staff shared:

*I was fortunate to grow up in a family homeland that was passed down ... . And having grown up there and watching the sea level rise over time, it was obvious. We had the King Tides [exceptionally high tides] come through; you see all of the stuff that's in the ocean in our yard. And so eventually that home is going to get passed down to me. And even though it's been the family home for generations, I believe it's going to be my generation and myself to have to decide on whether we sell it and move upland versus staying there, and the emotional toll ... and then what is the timing of it. If sea level rise impacts too quickly, is the value of the home going to drop? ... I think those are real things that people in Hawai'i are dealing with because of that.*

Both of those examples also point to the economic impact climate change is having in the U.S. Pacific. It is frequently the poorest communities that are getting hit the worst by climate change, but as staff pointed out, "They are not the culprits of the climate [problems] or the polluters, but they are the ones that see the biggest effects."

Another program staff further explained the problem:

*The Pacific Islands are smaller than they are here, so the sea level rise there is even more of an impact. And then that saltwater table is getting into a lot of those ag[riculture] plots ... as you try to be more self-sufficient, and you try to farm your land and you try to do that in accordance with the correct practices. But then the sea level is coming up and infiltrating what you're trying to do to make you less dependent, which would maybe decrease some pollution by, you know, shipping.*

In collaboration with Kupu CLDP's network of approximately 100 partners, which are located in Hawai'i, American Samoa, Guam, and Saipan and Rota (within CNMI), members are placed in host sites where they are trained to address one or more of the five problems identified in Kupu's logic model and mentored to be the next generation of leaders in conservation. The initiatives and member duties vary depending on the host site at which the member is placed.

Initiatives include invasive species removal, native habitat restoration and protection, watershed management, marine conservation, lab work, research, environmental education, and outreach and leading volunteer groups. Members are exposed to a broad array of professional opportunities within several environmental fields: ornithology, botany, natural and aquatic, resource management, biology, marine biology, and Hawaiian cultural studies. By working side-by-side with conservation professionals, members gain insights into the conservation field and how to give back to the community.

## Services Performed

The services members provide are varied and tailored to the conservation mission and needs of the host sites. The following is a sample of members' experiences:

- *My team focuses on aquatic invasive species here in Hawai'i so that can range from a lot of things. But we're looking at the four vectors of introduction—which are ballast waters, biofouling, marine debris, and aquarium release—and doing what we can to respond to those. We are also doing a lot of outreach to inform people, especially when it comes to things that are within their control.*
- *I worked with the state parks so I was an assistant to the park interpretive technician. And that basically entailed hiking, talking to visitors and community members, sharing about the*

*geologic features of Diamond Head, sharing about native and invasive plants and also the story of Diamond Head and how it ties to cultural Mauna Loa [in Native Hawaii culture, eruptions from the five volcanoes that form the Island of Hawai'i are spiritually significant manifestations of the land goddess Pele that is believed to reside in Mauna Loa] ...We also did a lot of hands-on work. So we had native plant gardens that we would help restore and maintain as well as frequent invasive species removal because it's 70 percent invasive species.*

- *My most recent term was with the environmental education program. That host site is within Kupu and that was a really great experience. So we were able to partner with different schools across this island. And so my role as environmental education leader was really just to bridge gaps between the schools and our various partners here on the island ... I also was able to connect these kids to different environmental education opportunities that were happening anywhere on the island. ... It's very important and it allows them [school children] to have a better idea of different career pathways where you can stay in Hawai'i. You can leave also but you can also come back and have these amazing jobs.*

## Role of Partners and Community Involvement

This section describes the role of partners in working with Kupu and broader community involvement.

### Partner Overview

Kupu CLDP has approximately 100 partners focused on conservation initiatives and outreach. Partners are located on almost every island in Hawai'i as well as islands in the larger U.S. Pacific and include large federal and state agencies as well as small, community-based nonprofits. Kupu's largest partners are the U.S. National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Hawai'i's Department of Land and Natural Resources. Program staff recognize the need for federal partnerships, but said it is important to have a balance that includes community-led organizations. Staff said, "It is amazing to have those federal partnerships and they also have the funds to help with our services. But we still want to get to those local organizations who know their backyards and know what the community needs. We just want to support that and with a young adult from that same community."

Kupu partners serve as host sites for Kupu national service members and provide members with the needed training to carry out their service. Host sites are recruited and then paired with members. The type of service performed and its connection to climate change impact is dependent on each host site. Program staff explained:

*The services that they [partners] are providing within those host sites can range widely from removing invasive species, planting native species so we can reduce runoff into our oceans, increasing the tree canopy here in Hawai'i and the respective areas that they're working. They could be doing research with certain host sites. We've had members working in our bays on the island where they're working with researchers to study the impact of climate change on our reefs. Nursery work too, to propagate the native species. The members are trying to help the host site partners reach their land management goals by building more resiliency within each area.*



## Community Involvement

Kupu works closely with community-led host sites, primarily small nonprofits focused on conservation work. The majority of the host sites Kupu collaborates with are community-led, and Kupu's role is to provide support to the leadership of these nonprofits. While national parks and other federal partners have their ways of gathering community support, Kupu mainly engages with smaller organizations that may not necessarily seek large-scale partnerships. These nonprofits often operate with limited resources, but Kupu aims to find ways to collaborate and enhance the collective impact.

At the center of Kupu's work with community partners is the focus on needs. Although staff recognize they have specific deliverables for their funders, they are continually considering what the community has expressed is needed as it relates to conservation. Listening to the communities is an important aspect of relationship building. Kupu's commitment to listening to community needs while maintaining strong relationships underscores their dedication to conservation and sustainability in Hawai'i.

The communities in these partner host sites are often involved through residents of the community serving on the boards of partner organizations. These residents have input into the strategic direction and activities of the host sites and, subsequently, the members' experiences. Program staff shared:

*We no longer own the land over there, but the nonprofit is managing ... the way the nonprofit decided to govern themselves, is that the board is made up of my family members. And so*

*it's often the elders in my family who are leading the board, who are directing that organization. Those people are the community members, they've been in the community for eight generations and they influence what things our members are going to get when they're placed there. Stories like that can be replicated over and over through a lot of our partners.*

In summary, when describing the value of the partners, program staff explained, "Kupu wouldn't be where it is today without our partners. ... They provide the opportunity to be in the land or in the ocean and they provide that skill set [training]." Likewise, the partners also appreciate Kupu's role, frequently sharing with Kupu staff that their organizations would not exist had it not been for Kupu.

## National Service Members

This section describes the member recruitment and selection processes, members' reasons for joining the program, and member demographics. Also included are perceptions about the stipend and training received.

### Recruitment and Selection

Kupu staff includes a recruiter who is a CLDP alumni. Recruitment occurs through multiple methods, including social media, posting on job and university boards and their website, tabling at events, and outreach to classrooms. Because the 6- and 11-month CLDP positions operate continuously, recruitment is an ongoing process.

According to program staff, the most effective recruitment method is word-of-mouth. Program staff said, "It's who you know, the network here in Hawai'i is very small, every island, even the territories. When we look at our database, we see that word-of-mouth has a higher percentage of how people are hearing about the programs."

A member confirmed the effectiveness of this approach:

*The person who brought me into the program was my good friend who was already working at that host site and he was also a Kupu member. ... He was, like, "This is a great opportunity for you to reconnect and come back." ... I think through that one bridge of a community person that I did know, it got me [involved]. I feel like I helped bring more people, so it was that one bridge connected through the community and through that we have brought more people."*

*When I was in my senior year [of college], I saw a Kupu ad in my College of Natural Sciences newsletter ... that sparked my interest. It was the conservation work being offered.*

AmeriCorps member

For recruitment outside of Hawai'i, Kupu works with the University of Guam, and in American Samoa, Kupu works with the program coordinator for recruitment. Program staff explained, "A Kupu program coordinator is shared with the University of Guam. We work directly with the University of Guam and its staff to help with recruitment. Our coordinator is a shared coordinator between the University of Guam and Kupu so we split the work. We all focus on that same conservation field."

Kupu prioritizes recruiting local applicants because these members are familiar with the culture and it is a way to develop community capacity. With more than 50 percent of applications from individuals not in Hawai'i or the U.S. Pacific, it is a "culture shock for the participants." Program staff added, "One thing that we've learned and we always strive for is to get local applicants—either raised here or been here, grew up here, or been here for a long time—into these positions and offering them those opportunities." The reason Kupu staff feel it is so important to recruit locally goes back to Kupu's mission of empowering youth to serve their communities through addressing environmental issues and environmental stewardship.

Although Kupu could “easily recruit” from the mainland, Kupu program staff said they want to be able to provide Hawai‘i and U.S. Pacific Island youth with career opportunities in the conservation sector. Program staff explained:

*We want to be able to provide these opportunities for our people here in Hawai‘i. The cost of living in Hawai‘i is getting out of hand ... . There are high-level paying jobs here in Hawai‘i in these [conservation] sectors. And the sector is growing by 7 percent every year. But the problem is that those high-level paid positions are often going to people who are not from here. So what Kupu gets to do is provide hands-on training and opportunities for our local people to get jobs like that. And so if everything happens in the ideal way, we can take somebody about to drop out of high school and end up in a high-paying career where they can sustain their family here in Hawai‘i. So I think those are—maybe not the definition of equity—but the action that we put behind trying to make things equitable for other people here.*

The challenge Kupu faces with recruiting locally is the members may not have the skills for the specific need or program that the host site is seeking. Therefore, as part of its larger organization strategy, Kupu has several other AmeriCorps programs and programs funded by other sources that help prepare youth so they have the necessary skills for becoming a CLDP member (e.g., Hawai‘i Youth Conservation Summer Program, Hawai‘i Youth Conservation Community Program).

Program staff explained how the multiple Kupu programs build upon one another to provide access to CLDP and to equip youth with the skills to attain a career in conservation:

*One of the Kupu programs works with young adults who are dropping out of high school. Early on in the history of Kupu, our COO and our CEO—two of the three founders of the organization—recognized that a lot of young adults who are falling by the wayside of the [Hawai‘i Department of Education], weren’t getting the education they needed. And if we couldn’t solve something like that, then they wouldn’t be able to access an AmeriCorps program. They wouldn’t be able to access a lot of services. And so for that reason, they opened up what we call the community program. And so what the organization tried to do, AmeriCorps can be for everyone but recognize that we also may have to step down to lift someone up to the level of what AmeriCorps program can offer ... [equity is defined as] access to services that they likely would not have had access to before.*

Another program staff added:

*And we’re trying to—not only in our AmeriCorps program but Kupu as a whole—be at almost every kind of major point in a young adult’s or in a child’s growth. So hopefully through [Kupu’s] education department, where we’re showing them opportunities in the middle school ... and then you also have opportunity during the summer as high school. “Oh, you just graduated from high school?”—this is another entry point. So really trying to communicate and make aware that you have this opportunity should you want it and it’s available to you. There’s no barrier ... there’s some red tape that AmeriCorps comes with but we’ll walk you through that and we’ll get you into the program, which we believe will provide huge growth.*

## Why Members Join

Of the three alumni and three current members participating in the focus groups, four were from Hawai‘i, either having been born and raised in the state or having lived there before becoming an AmeriCorps member. Across all six members, the underlying reason for joining Kupu was because of the conservation focus, desire

to pursue a conservation career, and the need to get entry-level experience. The following responses from three members illustrate these sentiments.

- *When Kupu did their presentation in my college ... what they promoted and shared about the program was being invited in nature, getting to know your community, working with your community, and learning about all these really special places. ... So that is what lured me, as I went through orientation, then I learned more about, "Oh this is about AmeriCorps, this is about serving and helping our community." ... [I]t really impacted the trajectory of my life to be honest. ... That experience was one of many that really helped me to hone in on my passion. ... Every time that I came back to Kupu it just became stronger and stronger, my connection to the community and this place became stronger and stronger, so I am super grateful for that.*
- *When I joined Kupu it was because they had those same values [that I do] and they wanted to incorporate themselves into this unique conservation work. And I was specifically interested in marine conservation because that's what I decided I really want to focus on for the rest of my career. So, looking into their programs and seeing these cool opportunities with [partner] and the urchin hatchery team, I knew it was a good organization to get me where I needed to go.*

The third member had a positive experience with another AmeriCorps program and wanted to continue a second term:

- *My previous AmeriCorps fellowship was more like civic engagement; doing climate planning, doing electrification. I really did enjoy that but I've always just been drawn to conservation. Whenever I have time, volunteering at the aquarium or the random side jobs I've picked up, have all been super involved in conservation ... . I didn't really know about other AmeriCorps conservation options other than Kupu. Just in my search I knew that was a goal to move to Hawai'i and do conservation work on the islands because it's such a unique environment out here.*

## Member Characteristics

CLDP is open to individuals age 17 or older who have a high school diploma. The majority of the members are in their early 20s. Kupu targets recruitment locally and in the 2023–24 program year about half of the 692 applications received were Hawai'i-based. The common characteristic across all CLDP members is their passion for conservation and making a difference in climate change.

## Stipend

CLDP member benefits in Hawai'i include a stipend of up to \$1,280 biweekly, Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of \$6,895 for members completing a full-time term, health care benefits, and childcare assistance. Kupu staff also support members with signing up for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, or SNAP, benefits. Given the high cost of living in Hawai'i and the U.S. Pacific Islands, members said the stipend was insufficient to meet their needs but added there had been an increase this year. The stipend amount poses an issue preventing those who may like to join. One member shared, "Our median house costs over a million dollars, that's crazy ... . I think it [Kupu CLDP] needs to be accessible to people of the community to do these programs." Another member added, "A lot of people will stop at even applying when they see the living allowances. But we're like, 'No it's more than that—it's the experience, it's the relationship, it's the networking.' "

Members unanimously agreed that the networking and experience gained in the conservation field outweighed the financial compensation. One member said, "At the time when I was a Kupu member, I had two



other jobs ... . My Kupu work felt so important to me and I was so passionate about it. I got to have this opportunity to build bridges and work with the next generation.”

A second member added:

*The experience outweighed the paycheck. But I would not have been able to do the program [if I weren't living with family]. So there's generational living where we're paying very, very minimal rent right now. ... Unfortunately, I do not feel the stipend is livable in Hawai'i without a lot of other variables that make it so you can do it. Do I feel like the experience is 100 percent worth it? Yes, my trajectory has completely changed.*

Although not common, when housing is provided, the stipend is more manageable. One member explained:

*I got super lucky last year and housing was provided, which is a rarity I understand, but that was amazing. It was really the only reason I was able to come out here, because my previous internship on the mainland was making pennies. So having that bump it made it seem like so much money. You realize that very quickly—that, you know, unless you're careful with it, it's really not going to go far in Hawai'i.*

For members who do not have family to live with or if housing is not provided, finding affordable housing is a challenge. One member said, “The trickiest part, I think—especially coming from the mainland—is finding housing ... even just moving from Maui to O‘ahu is a big struggle, because affordable housing is so rare these days.”

## Training

This section describes the specific AmeriCorps training that is provided by Kupu and the training that members can individually opt to receive based on career goals.

### Corps Training

Kupu provides a 1-day orientation and training on AmeriCorps–required information for all members at the start of each term. Kupu members also receive a number of other topical and skill trainings, such as CPR and first aid training, resume development, Hawaiian culture and protocols, and soft skills (e.g., how to have difficult conversations, interviewing). During a member’s 11-month term there are also 2 service days where they get a chance to visit other sites on their island and connect with other Kupu members and staff. Toward the end of their terms a “next steps” workshop is led by the program coordinators, which provides members an opportunity to consider what they want to do after Kupu, how they want to use their education award, and networking with federal and state partners as well as alumni.

Specific to the Hawaiian culture training, program staff shared:

*We strive to have Hawaiian cultural practices as a part of the program ... . A lot of members, especially those who move here, are interested and they want to learn. ... Every site, especially our nonprofits, they have their own protocols. And a lot of times, even members—if they're placed at a site that typically doesn't practice protocol—the member will take it upon themselves to learn the protocol because they want to make sure that they are in the right standing and that they should be doing the work that they're doing and being there.*

The technical training is provided by the partners who are host sites. The philosophy is that the host sites are the experts in conservation and AmeriCorps members can spend their terms learning from those experts in the field. For example, the host sites provide training in identifying native species, how to use heavy equipment, fire training, GIS software, and developing classroom lesson plans. Through their service with partner sites, members have opportunities to receive certifications in areas such as chainsaws and Wilderness

First Aid. The following example shared by program staff illustrates the broad array of training a member may receive depending on their host site:

*There are certain certifications that members need. If they are utilizing or riding in a helicopter, they have to take [helicopter operations] aviation training or training to use certain chemicals or herbicides or ATV/UTV [all-terrain vehicles and utility terrain vehicles] operation. So depending on the type of site and the equipment that they are using, then they do provide certifications to the members. Any time that a site cannot fund that training for that member through their organization, then they'll reach out to us.*

Members expressed appreciation for the training opportunities, whether they were formal or informal. One member discussed the various certifications they received and commented, "I can put that on my resume ...



people look for it when you have it on your resume. It's just nice to get those certifications on there. So I really appreciate the training opportunities that they provide." A second member explained, "There were a lot of opportunities to jump in and learn as you go, which is the phrase *ma ka hana ka ike* [learn by doing]."

### Individual-Specific Training

Kupu CLDP provides a professional development reimbursement program to the members. These resources may be used by members for individual development needs, such as attending a conference or a specific class or training that will advance their growth as it relates to their service position and career goals. Program staff shared:

*I have noticed that in the past year or so a lot of our members are taking more advantage of this professional development training opportunity we have where if they find something and they bring it to us ... the opportunity to see if we can cover the cost for that training. Some of it is traveling to the continent and taking part in a*

*conference. One went for climate change. It could be a class that they want to attend. They are telling us what they want to do.*

One member shared the value of being able to have the funds to attend a statewide conservation conference:

*Being aware of climate change, just as someone who has seen it every day and gone to college for environmental science, it's kind of at the forefront of my mind constantly. But being able to participate in things like the Hawai'i Conservation Conference was magnificent. It was such a wonderful opportunity to go hear people talk about a huge range of different*

*programs that are across the islands and across the nation on ways to mitigate climate change as well.*

## Outcomes

This section includes information about performance measurement and evaluation, including any challenges. Program outcomes, both member and community, are described as well as a discussion of the facilitators and barriers to meeting the intended outcomes.

### Performance Measurement and Evaluation

With a primary focus on environmental stewardship and interventions, including invasive species removal and trail remediation, Kupu selected as its two outputs acres of parks or public land treated (EN4) and miles of trail treated (EN5) and the one required outcome as acres of public land improved (EN4.1). Program staff said all of their partners and members are contributing to helping with climate change as measured by one of these two selected outputs. However, the challenge in not meeting those metric results when they are unable to fill all their positions.

Program staff explained:

*I know that 100 percent we're tied to all the work that we are doing to affect climate change. ... We're tracking the acreage cleared, which ties in with invasive removal, plants and animals; riparian buffer; coastal restoration; and also native planting. So we are doing that with all our partners; everyone is different. Their type of work in the field is different ... conservation is a broad word in itself ... . But when we don't fill our positions, then that work that could've been done by that body cannot be counted. So that's why recruiting is so important, filling positions is so important, having these added benefits for members is important ... . Part of the reason we don't fill our positions is because the cost of living here is so expensive.*

To collect output data, members complete tracking forms that are input into Salesforce. The site managers review the data and Kupu staff are charged with an overall review every 2 weeks where they conduct data quality checks. To measure program-specific performance, the members and host sites complete midterm and end-of-term surveys. The member surveys measure the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and changes in behaviors. The host site surveys focus on the contributions of the member and their accomplishments as they relate to the host site's goals. To measure impact on the economy, Kupu leadership compiles the number of hours of member service and produces a metric that equates the monetary value of their service that is contributed to the economy. Being able to assess the long-term impact of CLDP on the members was an area for which Kupu staff wished they had systematic data and they noted the challenges with collecting data from alumni.

As a national grantee, Kupu is required to have a rigorous evaluation. To meet that expectation, Kupu is part of a consortium of AmeriCorps National grantees that has contracted with an external evaluator to conduct a study in which data are being aggregated from multiple conservation corps nationwide and using a quasi-experimental post-hoc comparison group design. The external evaluation is part of a broader effort to develop and implement standard measures for conservation corps in The Corps Network's Public Lands Service Coalition.

Challenges with conducting an impact study were described in Kupu's application and are two-fold. First, the purposeful selection of service sites often makes it difficult to include comparison control sites in the evaluation design. Second, service activities occur in diverse habitats under dynamic conditions based on the

individualized priorities and strategies of partner agencies, which complicates standardization and comparison.

## Member Outcomes

This section describes member outcomes in the areas of civic engagement, technical skills, and career preparation.

### Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is embedded within CLDP both as a part of the service members are performing—Kupu Service Days—and a week-long service program. Because of the opportunities afforded to members during their service and valuing community betterment and addressing social issues, members agreed they planned to continue with civic engagement activities.

One member shared:

*I think the most that I was civically engaged was when working with students and bridging that gap between government and school ... . Even though I was bringing a lot of awareness to the students, I feel like I was teaching myself also how to be engaged in our community ... it was a whole new world of how to be engaged as a citizen here in Hawai'i. Not just how to have your voice be heard but also how to find that resource, how to find knowledge. Learning that you really have to break out of your day-to-day norm to find information and resources to make educated decisions.*

A second member shared an experience they had during one of the service days and how that impacted their decision to continue volunteering:

*I've also gotten to build rock walls, the Native Hawaiian way, where you don't use any cement. You learn how to stack the rocks in a specific way that makes them super sturdy. So just being able to keep finding those different ways to volunteer and learn about Hawai'i has been really great and something that I'll definitely continue doing.*

A third member discussed why they were volunteering more now than they had in the past:

*Surrounding yourself with other AmeriCorps members, I mean—we're not in it for the money—is inspiring because all these other people are also interested in helping the community and that's how you find other volunteer opportunities. I've volunteered more in the past 2 years than I think I have most of my life, just because people you know also know of other opportunities. They're always looking for more people. So it's been really great to just meet new people who are also interested in outreach and civic engagement.*

### Technical Skills and Career Preparation

Individuals who become CLDP AmeriCorps members are fueled with a passion to improve communities as it relates to climate change solutions and, more specifically, in the area of conservation. Kupu enables the members to turn their passion into a career. A major focus of Kupu is for their programs to be part of a career pathway and therefore significant emphasis is placed on ensuring members have experiences that prepare them for attaining careers in conservation. For context, salaries for entry to mid-level careers in conservation and natural resources in Hawaii can range from an average \$41,518 – \$53,335 annually. The salary is dependent upon the position's specific focus in conservation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ZipRecruiter [Natural Resources salary in Hawaii](#), retrieved September 2, 2024; ZipRecruiter [Conservation salary in Hawaii](#), retrieved September 2, 2024.

Members valued the technical skills gained through certifications, field experiences, developing their leadership and soft skills, and networking. They were excited about the opportunities to “get a foot in the door” in the conservation sector through their Kupu CLDP member term and attributed Kupu with giving them a competitive advantage because of the relationships they were able to develop with conservation experts and potential employers.

One member described the importance of technical training and how it advances their career goals:

*Some of the technical training I got last year, like the ATV/UTV [all-terrain vehicle and utility task vehicle] certification, was great. I was able to physically handle endangered species, which is wonderful. Just using this equipment is so important for career growth. So being able to say, “Yeah I work with this specific laboratory set and this is what we did working in aquaculture.” If I wanted a career in aquaculture it’s definitely a lot easier now that I’ve got the experience. It’s tricky to gain that experience because entry-level does not mean entry-level anymore. You already have to have 3–5 years’ worth of experience, so I definitely think it’s been really helpful to do that.*

Discussing the importance of the experiences and networking with the host sites, program staff explained that not only are members well positioned for conservation careers but the program also develops equitable opportunities for individuals in the communities. As one staff said:

*When you get that local person who maybe has only gone to high school, and they don’t have the college degree that someone else does, but they’ve been serving at that host site ... and then they can get hired, and they can move up and keep growing. I think that is a really big one [of how our program addresses equity]. ... Often times it’s not necessarily the person with the degree or with all the skills on paper. It’s the person who knows the place and knows the plants and knows the land and the area. In Hawai’i it’s about who you know. On top of that, if you have a connection to a place, the chance of you getting a position is higher than someone with all the bells and whistles. A lot of our local kids may not have the college degree that they’re looking for, but they have a passion to give back to help restore land ... . Most sites and partners want to invest in that, because they see them for the long haul.*



All of the interviewed members described examples of how their experiences with CLDP have impacted their career pathways in conservation and expressed the desire to continue their careers in Hawai’i. One member described how their experience in Kupu was integral in their career pathway and their desire to help others learn about the opportunities to become involved in conservation:

*My journey started in my freshman year of college. ... From my first experience with Kupu, I learned that it's not just nature [that I love]. I love the people who love this work. I love surrounding myself with like-minded people. So that kept on going throughout my Kupu journey. And my love for the environment became a love for people and the community here. Especially the like-minded community, the folks in nonprofits that are doing 'āina [care for the land] work in all the many ways that you can do that. And then working with students, that was another pivot of working with the next generation. ... I love making connections and finding ways to provide those "a-ha" moments.*

## Community Outcomes

Kupu members are placed in communities throughout Hawai'i and the U.S. Pacific Islands. Members cited examples of how the communities have been impacted by the services they provide at host sites. Impacts include invasive species removal, native habitat restoration, and outreach and education. Following are specific examples shared by the members:

- *We focus on making the reefs better and making sure the invasive algae isn't really a problem. So the corals and fish and all of the other important parts of those biospheres have the chance to grow, which also helps out the surrounding communities who need to fish. ... What we're doing is really helping the environment so these people can continue to have their livelihoods and hopefully they're less impacted than they would be. And even with limu algae. ... But now there's so much invasive algae that the natives [algae] that are important to Hawaiian culture aren't there anymore. So by clearing up this room for these native species to go back, we're also trying to help maintain that part of the culture, because there are less people who understand different algae species and that kind of thing now than there used to be.*
- *I worked in visitor services for [U.S.] Fish & Wildlife and had mostly elementary school groups ... we talked about our endangered bird species in the wetland that I worked. It was really great to connect with the community and explain why what we do is so important, why climate change is so important, and we have to take it seriously.*
- *As soon as COVID allowed it, we pretty much opened up to everybody—whether it was schools or Boeing [airplane maker] came, or other corporate places. We just wanted to be a space where people knew whether you worked in an office or at a school or anywhere that you could come and learn how to malama 'āina [care for the land] and hopefully take that into your own community and do that as well.*

## Barriers to Meeting Intended Outcomes

Restrictions associated with AmeriCorps funding are the primary barriers to meeting outcomes according to program staff. Three of those four restrictions relate to the members:

1. Members must be U.S. citizens,
2. Background checks, and
3. Stipends.

The other restriction concerns partners.

Hawai'i and the U.S. Pacific Islands have a large population from Micronesia and although they can work, pay taxes, and serve in the military, they cannot be in an AmeriCorps program unless they are citizens, nationals, or

lawful permanent residents. Program staff said, “That is one of the struggling populations here in Hawai‘i, Guam, and Saipan and unfortunately we can’t recruit for that.”

Obtaining background checks and doing member onboarding has been a challenge both on Maui, following the 2023 fires, as well as in other sites such as American Samoa, program staff explained:

*With the isolation of some of our sites, like American Samoa, they don’t have a field location, so the amount of time to do a background check in American Samoa could take months. It’s been a huge issue. ... There’s one site on Maui that everyone has to go to that site, and they’re only open for a fraction of the day. So when we try to onboard over there it’s a challenge.*

The third member-related barrier and the primary one according to program staff is the stipend. With such a high cost of living, potential members are choosing other options. Program staff said:

*The living wage here in Hawai‘i is getting out of control. People ... are making really easy decisions. It’s not to join our program because they can get more money somewhere else and live a more comfortable life here. So we have to really be creative in how we communicate the value of the program ... . We used to be kind of the big fish, but now there are a lot of other programs that are offering similar experiences.*

A fourth AmeriCorps restriction that poses a barrier to Kupu is the definition of who can be a partner. Program staff said many nonprofits would like to be partners and could provide a valuable member experience, but because they only operate with volunteers, they are not able to be partners.

## Facilitators to Meeting Intended Outcomes

Program staff were asked about the aspects of CLDP that were either most effective or helped to facilitate progress toward its intended outcomes. Kupu staff said that creating a sense of community among the members is important as well as offering opportunities to grow and learn together. Activities Kupu offers to achieve those aims include in-person orientation, Kupu Days, and week-long service programs. Kupu Days occur twice on Fridays during a member’s year-long term where members gather for training and team building. The week-long service programs bring the members from across the islands together in a camplike setting. Kupu staff explained the purpose behind these in-person activities:

*During the program year we want to be able to add all these extra benefits for them, so that they know that it’s worth their time. And that they feel valued during the program, because anybody can do the work ... . It’s giving these members the opportunity to expand their growth so that they’re not just coming through the program ... . When they leave us they have a solid tool belt with them, because you can take that anywhere you go.*

Program staff expressed that the partners who serve as the host sites are critical for the program’s success. Speaking about the array of partners, one program staff said:

*A facilitator is our network of partners. It’s still amazing to see all that they [members] could choose from. You could do ocean work, you could do lab work, you could do nursery work, ... you could do aqua culture. ... I think we’ve also grown to a point where one of the facilitators is that work often comes to us at this point versus us going to them. As far as the conservation world, the sustainability world, Kupu is not a small name anymore, here in Hawai‘i at least. So we’re often called upon for a lot of that work. And so the work comes probably at a rate that’s faster than what we can handle at times.*

Also highlighted by program staff was the ability for Kupu to connect the members with career opportunities and the emphasis on the interconnection between the Hawaiian culture and the service. Two program staff shared:

- *The most effective thing is that we're able to connect our members with people who know what the jobs are and who've been in these roles. They're learning from experts and often local experts from Hawai'i or the areas that they're from. I think that's the strength of our program by far. ... But at the end of the day, it's the connections they make with the people who are doing the work. And I think the people who are doing the work; they're connected to the land. In Hawai'i the culture and the land are one thing. It's not really separated. And so a member experience in working in the land is, I want to say, a little different than a member experience maybe on the continent. ... here it's embedded ... from our orientations, we really ... from the start to the end, we have a [hō'ike] or end-of-term celebration.*
- *We emphasize that the culture and the service you're doing are intertwined. And the person that is really going to bring you into that is that partner or that host site, because they'll tell you about the history of the land, and then the cultural stories that are connected to that land ... . We call them great stories from the members, that theme of ... just being a part of something bigger is prevalent, I think, in a lot of those stories. Not only did I plant hundreds of trees, I now know why that tree is significant to the land and the people. I think that's why a lot of people from the continent come to Hawai'i. Even some of our local kids who might step away, they get reintroduced ... they find a part of their family history or their family culture and they get to reconnect with.*

## Closing

Kupu CLDP directly impacts climate change through the services members provide in their host site placements, but as importantly—or perhaps more so—the program develops a career pathway in conservation for the members. In line with Kupu's mission, exposing members to these career pathways simultaneously empowers youth to serve their communities through character-building, service-learning, and environmental stewardship opportunities.

While the importance of these opportunities for individuals interested in conservation cannot be understated, the impact of Kupu CLDP's program similarly extends to the well-being of community-based organizations and their local environments. Through the services of members, organizations across the islands of Hawai'i, U.S. Pacific Islands of American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands have increased capacity to address the most pressing conservation needs of local environments and their surrounding residents. This approach is particularly important for the focused community nonprofit organizations that often operate with limited resources. Through the provision of a CLDP member, these partners have the opportunity to pursue conservation activities of value to their landscape that may otherwise not have been feasible.

In addition to these local environments receiving the care they need, CDLP members obtain valuable real-world experience and skills in conservation from a local perspective. Throughout their service terms, members experience the importance of conservation informed by local needs and community residents, cultivating an expansive network of individuals invested in the betterment of their environments. Members and program staff alike explained the benefit of service with CLDP in creating a more resilient environment through dedicated conservation efforts and a skilled workforce. One program staff summarized:

*To keep it simple, what I see Kupu doing is developing ... the awareness of conservation as a career and also that conservation has many, many levels. You can be in the lab, you can be*



*in the office, you can be working with drones, you can be out in the field, boots on the ground. So I think the way that Kupu is addressing climate change is by diversifying the economy by providing awareness and opportunities for folks to do something different here in Hawai'i ... . Kupu's partnerships with not just conservation, but the University of Hawai'i, and the government. We're really tapped in and trying to figure out what's the next move. How is Hawai'i being impacted by climate change and how can we be a part of the solution, rather than sit back and see what everyone else does. ... And if it's not us directly, then how can we support our partners to do that? That makes me feel really great about being with Kupu and providing these AmeriCorps opportunities to the next generation.*

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## About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov).

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