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National Park Service Testimony

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Kupu, meaning “to sprout, grow,” in Hawaiian is a Honolulu-based 501(c)3 non-profit that empowers youth to serve their communities and create a more sustainable and pono Hawai’i. We provide hands-on training programs that educate and mentor young adults (16-24 years in age) to become stewards of our culture and resources, helping them develop a strong connection to the place in which we live. Since 2007, KUPU has risen to meet the increasing demands of natural resource based jobs by training over 3,500 youth in the areas of conservation, sustainability, Hawaiian culture, and education.

Kupu has worked with the National Park Service over the last decade throughout the state of Hawaii. I also have been on a national board of the Corps Network, which is the membership association of 135 other Conservation Corps across the country. Conservation Corps engage young adults and veterans – also known as Corpsmembers - across the country in meaningful work that is cost effective, improves resources, creates career pathways, and are developing the next generation of outdoor stewards, recreationists, and entrepreneurs.

Kupu’s programs have public-private-partnerships with some of the top grossing National Parks in the US. These include Haleakala and Volcanoes National Park. We have seen youth from all walks of life come together for a common purpose of caring for these national treasures. They help to address backlog maintenance, rebuild trails, remove invasive species, restore fish and wildlife habitat, and much more. We are able to efficiently and effectively respond to government needs through this partnership. As an example, we are looking at providing a Kupu member to the new Honouliuli National Monument on Oahu to help address all the permitting and other needs to allow on the ground work to get done that has been deferred for quite some time due to there only being one staff member. Last year, Kupu’s 300+ corps members helped to remove over 20,000 acres by of invasive species and plant over 210,000 native species. They also helped many of the organizations we serve, including the National Park Service, by engaging and leading volunteers and partner organizations. Our corps members led over 10,000 volunteers last year alone.

While the conservation work is important, our corps members are being shaped into responsible, hard working, and effective individuals. They often camp, need to learn survival skills, and also gain in-demand job skills like teamwork and problem solving. They also learn to be entrepreneurial and self-starters. Corps like Kupu provide college credits in addition to a living allowance and through AmeriCorps, we provide educational awards to make higher education or job training more achievable.

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This year we will provide close to \$1 million in education awards in Hawaii, California, and American Samoa. Because of legislation supported by this committee last Congress, corps members can obtain front-line jobs at NPS and other agencies in a non-competitive way for 2 years. The bipartisan 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act would be another important tool to enable us to engage more youth and veteran Corpsmembers, target more high priority projects, and expand the cost-saving projects we can accomplish with other federal partners.

The ability for NPS to hire local, former corps members they are familiar with is a huge competitive advantage both for these young adults coming from underserved, often rural communities as well as for the National Park. NPS has only 7% of its workforce under 29 years old and 75% are over the age of 40. Kupu is seeing tremendous results in our alums receiving training through their work on public lands and then being hired in related fields in the public and private sector. As an example, Senator Hirono visited our Department of Land and Natural Resources with us last month. There she saw that 30% of the current employees are Kupu alums and there were another 12 full time corps members working with DLNR. Altogether, about 50% of their workforces were either current Kupu corps members or alums! With many agencies anticipating a retiring workforce in the near term, Corps like Kupu along with legislation like the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act are a great tool for resource management agencies.

Hawaii's First Lady, Dawn Ige was a corps member at Volcanoes National Park and now is with her husband at the highest level of state government as an example! Corps are important as they provide a hand up, not a hand out. Young adults are gaining important job skills while effectively meeting needs today and they are being prepared for the workforce. We are building a more resilient future for our country by creating resilient people who will be lifelong stewards of our resources and public lands.

Corps add diversity to the National Parks in age, ethnic heritage, and socio-economic capacities. Kupu has also received support through the National Park Service and another Corps, Conservation Legacy, to deploy a AmeriCorps VISTA member in Hawaii with the focus of engaging Native Hawaiian participants within our park. To native communities, parks are not just a place to have recreation, they are also sacred places that are part of their culture and that carry generational heritage and wealth from one generation to the next. We have found that providing meaningful opportunities to not only visit, but work in these sacred areas has helped many of our native young adults to better define their identity and purpose in life— issues I know are a passion of Ranking Member Hirono, and Chairman Daines.

Finally, as you may have seen in my bio, my background is in business. I went to Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania and really appreciated that education. But what challenged me, coming from Hawaii where the aloha spirit is so prevalent, is that what I saw was mostly about getting to the top and individual success. What is exciting to me about corps and the work we do at Kupu is that the work being done rises the tide for America's youth, the parks, the natural resources, and the surrounding community while making economic sense. It is about creating community success that perpetuates for generations to come. There are definite quantitative impacts through the work we are doing in the natural resources.



We have captured some of the life-changing impact through a national study on corps conducted by Columbia University. Through the metrics derived by this study, we found that last year Kupu had a socio-economic impact of \$16.3 million. To date Kupu has had close to \$90 million in impact over the last decade or a 1:3.4 cost to benefit ratio. For every dollar spent on our programs, we see a 340% ROI to our resources, youth, and larger communities. What's more is that we are able to leverage Federal dollars. Kupu's budget is only about 25% federally funded. We are able to multiply Federal dollars to create a much larger impact. That is money well spent.

Additionally, the projects that Corps accomplish are cost-effective. An independent study commissioned by the National Park Service found a 50-80 percent cost savings in using Corps on projects. The current administration, in its FY18 NPS Budget Justification also stated that Corps helped by them "maintaining its resources in a cost effective manner while providing the participants with developmental job skills training and education." The work we get done is also important – from backlog maintenance, to recreation, to wildfire remediation, and fish and wildlife habitat – these are projects that land managers prioritize.

To understand that by engaging young adults in the National Parks and other agencies, you are getting important conservation work done, creating career pathways, helping young adults to find their purpose and passion in life, and are doing something that has meaningful economic impact, this is a win-win situation. Furthermore, this does not account for the long-term impact created in the lives of youth who may have otherwise not found their purpose or passion. We have seen a tremendous number of young adults who have found the career field they want to pursue like Jon Brito, a young man from a small island called Moloka'i who won the White House Champion of Change award a few years back. Jon went on to college and now is employed in a conservation career. We are also seeing entrepreneurship inspired by work with Kupu. Kupu alumni Justine Espiritu helped to recently launch a new bike share program called "Biki" in Honolulu that is becoming a huge success.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for hearing my testimony. I hope that you can see my passion for engaging youth in our National Parks and how they really have become a vehicle to positively transform lives, economy, and communities while getting important work done within the parks. I hope that you will continue to support initiatives and legislation that encourage youth and veteran engagement and specifically provide employment opportunities through the work being done in parks and other agencies. Mahalo for all you do for our country and aloha, John.