A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

About 6,000 years ago and before the arrival of the Hawaiians, Kawai Nui and Kä'elepulu were bays connected to the ocean and extended a mile inland of the present coastline. This saltwater environment is indicated by inland deposits of sand and coral.

ULUPÔ HEIAU

STATE MONUMENT

Ulupō Heiau was transferred from the Territorial Board of Agriculture and Forestry to Territorial Parks in 1954. In the early 1960s, through a joint effort of State Parks and Kaneohe Ranch, the stone walkway was placed atop the heiau and the stone paving was laid around the springs. The bronze plaque was installed in 1962 by the Commission on Historical Sites. Ulupō Heiau is listed on the National and Hawaii Registers of Historic Places.

At Ulupō Heiau, State Parks seeks to promote preservation of the heiau and heighten public awareness about the cultural history of Kawai Nui.

STATE OF HAWAI'I

Department of Land and Natural Resources
Division of State Parks

Special recognition is given to the Kailua Hawaiian Civic Club for their hard work and dedication as the curators of Ulupō Heiau.

The Windward YMCA is acknowledged for their cooperation with the public visitation and interpretation of Ulupō Heiau.

PRESERVE HAWAI'I'S PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Traditionally, food items were left as offerings at a heiau. Please do not wrap or move rocks and do not leave items such as coins, incense, or candles as they cause long-term damage to this fragile resource.

Kailua, Oʻahu

Artist's rendering of Ulupō Heiau as it may have looked in 1750.
It's 1750. Kaihau is the political seat of power for the district of Ko'olauapo and a favored place of the O'ahu chiefs for its abundance of fish and good canoe landings. The houses of the ali'i (chiefs), their families, and their attendants surround Kaihau Bay. Behind the sand beach is the large, fertile expanse of Kawai Nui which has been converted to a fishpond surrounded by an agricultural fieldsystem. Kawai Nui is a large, 400-acre fishpond with an abundance of mullet, awa, and o'opu. Ka'elepulu and Nu'upia fishponds are nearby. The maka'ainana (commoners) provide support for this chiefly residence. Farmers grow kalo (taro) in the irrigated lo'i (fields) along the streams from Maunawili and along the edges of the fishponds. Crops of dryland kalo, banana, sweet potato, and sugarcane mark the fringes of the marsh. The fishermen harvest fish from the fishponds and the sea. The kāhuna (priests) oversee the religious ceremonies and rites at several heiau around Kawai Nui. There is Ulupō Heiau on the east with Pahukini Heiau and Holomakane Heiau on the west side.

Hauwahine, the mo'o or guardian spirit, protects the people of Kawai Nui and assures an abundance of fish. The legendary association of Ulupō Heiau with the menēhune suggests the antiquity of this site. The massiveness and quantity of rock carried many miles hint at its cultural importance. Tradition records Kualoa, more than 10 miles away, as one source of these stones.

It is likely that the function of this heiau changed over time. It probably began as a ma'apele or agricultural heiau with ceremonies and rites conducted to insure the fertility of the crops grown in Kawai Nui. In later times, it may have become a luakini heiau dedicated to success in war with structures erected atop this massive stone platform, including an altar, an oracle tower or anu'u, thatched hale, and notches in the terraces to hold the kī'oi wooden images. The spring off the corner of the heiau was another important feature related to the ceremonial traditions of the site.

Ulupō Heiau measures 140 by 180 feet with walls up to 30 feet in height. The construction of this massive terraced platform required a large work force under the direction of a powerful ali'i. Several O'ahu chiefs lived at Kaihau and probably participated in ceremonies at Ulupō Heiau, including Kakahihea in the 1400s and Kuali'i in the late 1600s. Kuali'i fought many battles and he may have rededicated Ulupō Heiau as a luakini heiau. Maui chief Kahekili came to O'ahu in the 1780s and lived in Kaihau after defeating O'ahu high chief Kahahana for control of O'ahu. Kamemeha I worked at Kawai Nui fishpond and is said to have eaten the edible mud (lepo a la) of Kawai Nui when there was a shortage of kalo. But by 1795 when Kamemeha I conquered O'ahu, it is believed that Ulupō Heiau was already abandoned.

HISTORIC CHANGES
In the 1880s, Chinese farmers converted the kalo fields of Kawai Nui to rice. Cattle grazed throughout much of Kawai Nui and a large cattle pen was built atop Ulupō Heiau in the early 1900s. The cattle probably hastened the collapse of the rock faced terraces on the steep faces of the heiau platform.

The marsh began forming around 1920 when the rice fields and fishpond were abandoned and sitation followed. Today, the marsh is a habitat for Hawai'i's endangered waterbirds. The agricultural terraces and fishpond are now covered with silt, grasses, and bullrushes.