The University of Hawaii William S. Richardson School of Law’s environmental law program is nationally recognized but little known in the islands. Even less known is a new link between the school and the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Under Board of Land and Natural Resources Chairman Peter Young, the state’s primary protector of things natural – the bedrock for Hawaii’s visitor industry – is slowly assuming its proper role.

Months ago, Young said he wanted to answer the chief complaint about the DLNR by becoming more aggressive about enforcing rules and regulations. The DLNR and its policymaker, the BLNR, can move relatively quickly as long as there are few political concerns. A good example is how the board and the department moved to clean up Kaanapali Beach of commercial activities.

It has been less enthusiastic about instituting environmental protections that infringe on traditional island uses and practices, even though a greater population has made those uses and practices untenable. It has taken years to get a lay gill-net ban. The ban is due to be finalized within the next month or so, according to Young.

Enforcement has been hampered by the lack of officers in the field and by the legalities involved in bringing violators to justice. A good step toward resolving some of the legalities is a UH law school fellowship funded by the Hawaii Coral Reef Initiative.

UH environmental law graduate Blaine Rogers will be an in-house lawyer for the DLNR who will, according to Young, enhance the “ability to move violations through the system to either the Board of Land and Natural Resources or the courts.” Blaine will be working closely with the DLNR’s Division of Conservation and Resource Management, the department’s police force. Blaine says he will be involved “in bringing the most flagrant violators to justice.” That includes fish poaching and the taking of coral.

The two most important environmental needs in the islands are the enforcement of existing laws and the creation of more marine reserves. The law fellowship is an important step toward addressing one of those needs.