You don’t have to be very old to remember when bomb blasts shook the windows and rattled the silverware of homes all along South and West Maui. Anyone conscious during the late 1970s can recall with a thrill the rising up of Hawaiians and their supporters to demand that the bombing stop. Today, schoolkids learn about the Hawaiian Renaissance, when the indigenous people dared to tell the U.S. Navy: “It’s not okay to destroy a Hawaiian island. Put it back the way you found it.” To the uninformed, it looks as though the Navy fixed a few things and left. The truth is more complex.

Kaho‘olawe is the eighth largest Hawaiian island, one of four that constitute the County of Maui. It sends no representatives to the state legislature, though, because Kaho‘olawe is both uninhabited and uninhabitable. Too much UXO—unexploded ordnance. The United States began bombing the island during the 1920s, not long after territoryhood, escalated during World War II, then increasing through the Cold War. Today you can’t stick a shovel in the ground without risk of blowing up. Even in areas cleared to the depth of four feet—9 percent of the island—erosion exposes previously undiscovered bombs. And erosion continues to despoil Kaho‘olawe. Nearly two million tons of soil are washed into the sea each year, leaving behind slick slopes of hardpan, barren and bloody red.

Yet this calloused and stern terrain includes some 3,000 features listed with the National Register of Historic Places. From the summit of its single volcanic peak—one-seventh the height of the mountain six miles away, sunrise-blocking Haleakalā—you can observe the winds and currents that rush between the islands. Kaho‘olawe was once a navigational training center for Hawaiians; its name was Kanaloa, god of the sea. Some 800 documented archeological sites provide evidence that people lived, fished, farmed, and worshiped here before Western contact.

Kaho‘olawe’s environmental disaster started in 1793 with the introduction of goats, which scrambled over the fragile dry hillsides, gobbling native vegetation for the next sixty years. In 1858, the Kingdom issued ranching leases for the island. The ranchers planted kiawe (mesquite) trees, which produced good feed, but sucked up groundwater and desiccated their surroundings. By the early 1900s, not even famed Maui cattleman Angus McPhee could make his Kaho‘olawe ranch viable. Knowing that U.S. warships had been doing target practice nearby, he subleased his ranch to the Navy in May 1941. Seven months later, all hell broke loose at Pearl Harbor.

In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower ordered the island reserved for U.S. Navy purposes. But he also directed the Navy to eradicate all cloven-hoofed animals, cooperate with reforestation efforts, and “when the island was no longer needed . . . and without cost to the Territory of Hawaii, make the island safe for human habitation.”

Now that federal funds to restore “the Target Island” have dried up, Kaho‘olawe’s caretakers are scrambling to maintain the work of healing this sacred place.
increased armed readiness. The island became a kind of mayhem mock surface-to-air bombing targets. The Cold War demanded missionized with each ensuing conflict. During the Korean War the Navy Appropriations Act that included a memorandum of understand-

ritual and sweat labor, and still do to this day.

with archeological sites. These monthly accesses required swimming to a nonprofit, essentially Hawaiian orga-

consent decree and order. It required the Navy to protect cultural to a nonprofit, essentially Hawaiian orga-

In 1990, Aluli’s lawsuit succeeded, resulting in a historic conspiracy theories and made them martyrs to the cause.

As that suit simmered, Moloka‘i-born musician and orator George Helm spoke to the state legislature, procuring a resolution on behalf of the island. In 1980, Aluli’s lawsuit succeeded, resulting in a historic conspiracy theories and made them martyrs to the cause.

When Naho’opi‘i, in uniform, met with the PKO activists at their base camp, he recognized many of them as his former

The way it is” is far from ideal. The Navy pledged to clear 100

Emmett Aluli, two of the nine who reached the disputed island, even as the Coast Guard turned most others away. Right: Karla Villalba and Walter Ritte pull the boat ashore on Kaho‘olawe— and into history.

On February 14, 1976—Valentine’s Day—the fledgling activists meet in a Maui Community College classroom to plan a protest. In 1976, as a group of young activists prepared to sail from Moloka‘i to Kaho‘olawe, photographer Ian Lind received a call from Golf Kawaiwena Prepon, head of the Hawaiian Conservation of Native Claims, asking him to accompany them and document the attempt. The photos at right are from that journey. Top: George Helm (left), and Dr. Emmett Aluli, two of the nine

Put the ashes of your hat on the head of the Hawaiian

For Life, not bombing. The Coast Guard vessel wanders on the horizon.
percent of the surface and 30 percent of the subsurface. After more than seven years of earnest, almost frenetic efforts, the results were, correspondingly, less than 75 percent and less than 10 percent. The work involved flotillas of contracted helicopters moving hired personnel and equipment daily between Kahului and Kaho'olawe. The paperwork was monumental—environmental impact studies, transects, data processing. A traditional cleanup will focus on 500 acres, says Nahu'opii, but this work encompassed a 28,800-acre island. They mapped and studied thousands of 100-meter-square grids for the state to prioritize, and documented more than 800 archeological sites.

The whole operation simply ran out of money. For Congress and frankly most everyone else, the attention has wandered away to other matters.

The Navy’s website says its operation purged more than 100,000 ordnance items, 10 million pounds of metal, and 34,000 tons, installed more than 8,000 boundary posts, a 9.6-mile road (cost: $8.8 million), and some $10 million in equipment and facilities, all of which it handed to KIRC in the official transfer of access control at the end of 2003. At the transfer ceremony, staged on the grounds of ‘Iolani Palace in Honolulu, Rear Admiral Barry McCullough announced: “I am very pleased with the quality of the work done here. The efforts of all the workers and this team will allow the State of Hawai‘i to provide safe, meaningful access to the island for what the State has in mind.”

Michele McLean presently serves as chairwoman of KIRC. By day she is deputy planning director for the County of Maui and is a veteran of government work on county, state, and federal levels. Reflecting on KIRC’s use of its trust fund, she states firmly that she has never seen more efficient and effective use of appropriated moneys. But the island is still derelict.

Now that the federal trust fund has run out, it is time for the state legislature to pony up. The response has been feeble—$2 million for 2016 and 2017, a sum that cuts KIRC’s meager budget by two-thirds. This will certainly necessitate layoffs in its little staff of a dozen and a half, and cripple the commission’s ability to recruit and transport volunteer labor. Everyone who visits Kaho‘olawe is moved by its rugged beauty, its timeless aura, and its great need—but few can make the trip. So KIRC has created a public site next to the Kīhei Small Boat Harbor, where it stages monthly public-awareness events, and it is appealing for financial support. In one month last summer, KIRC raised $38,000, well short of its $100,000 goal.

The newest KIRC commissioner, appointed in Fall 2014, is Hōkūlani Holt, who in previous years helped the PKO establish cultural protocols for visits to Kaho‘olawe. When she joined the commission, she says, “I was shocked at the finances. To spend down the trust fund to almost nothing, and to have no other plan! I went, ‘I must be missing something. Everyone thinks this is okay.’”

KIRC chairwoman McLean expressed a similar puzzlement. The federal trust fund was never meant to be an endowment, but the state could have managed the money in some way other than to spend it down. Likewise, the State could have refused to take the island back in such ragged condition. “But we accepted it,” she said. “Now we’re stuck. . . .”

KIRC’s mood, though, is not blameful, nor is it determined that UXO will ever be cleared from the island. “It would [cost] hundreds of millions, if not billions, to be able to say that the bombs have been substantially cleared. Certainly we will never be able to say that the waters are safe,” says McLean.

More important: habitat restoration. Activists envision Kaho‘olawe as a refuge for endemic plants and wildlife. A sanctuary for seabirds, now that rising sea levels are drowning nesting sites on northwest seamounts and islets. An underwater shelter for the replenishment of fish populations. A living site of traditional Hawaiian culture. A model of alternative energy practices. Above all, a caution, and a reminder about right living.

“The islands are like family members,” says Holt. “How can I ignore my grandparents and set them adrift? Kaho‘olawe is not just for the Hawaiians. We as humans need a wild place. Kaho‘olawe is for all of us.”

Mike Nahu’opii, KIRC director