

# Protecting & restoring KAHOOLAWE

With KIRC funding almost gone, trip to former Target Isle highlights need for continued support

By EILEEN CHAO, Staff Writer

**R**oughly halfway into the hourlong boat ride from Kihei to Kahoolawe, the 'Ohua veers hard right and its engine slows to a purr.

Still at least 4 nautical miles from the former Target Isle, passengers aboard the 40-foot aluminum landing craft look for breaching whales or other signs to explain why the captain would stop in the middle of the ocean.

No whales, but a white speck bobs in the water, reflecting the sunlight as the object rises and falls. The captain circles around, closing in to what turns out to be a plastic bottle. The label, faded and overgrown with algae, offers no clue as to what the bottle once held or where it came from.

A crew member leans over the side of the vessel and scoops it up in a fishing net. It's just a fleeting moment before the journey continues to Kahoolawe, but it's also sign of the stewardship that has set the course for the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission.

Created in 2004, the commission and its staff, now 18 personnel, have worked to clear unexploded ordnance and strived to return the island to some semblance of what it was before the U.S. Navy used it as a firing range, ravaging the island for nearly 50 years beginning in 1941.

The bombing stopped only after members of the Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana began occupying the island in 1976. The protests spurred a lengthy lawsuit in U.S. District Court. President George H.W. Bush finally ordered an end to live-fire training on the island in 1990.

The federal government then spent about a decade and \$350 million clearing unexploded ordnance from about 75 percent of the island's surface. Only about 10 percent of the island, or 2,647 acres, was cleared to a depth of 4 feet. About 6,692 acres of the island's surface remains littered with munitions. Unescorted access is unsafe.

Visitors are reminded to remain close to staff, be aware and, most importantly, "if you didn't drop it, don't pick it up."

Such was the case during a visit to the island last week. Mayor Alan Arakawa and several staff members braved the boat ride from Kihei Small Boat Harbor to Kahoolawe on Tuesday to tour two solar photovoltaic-powered facilities that the county has sponsored in the last three years.

KIRC secured three county Office of Economic Development grants since 2013, each worth \$25,000, county officials said. Those funds went toward installing a solar system to power housing facilities for staff and volunteers and other improvements that helped cut energy costs on an island with very little infrastructure.

Arriving at Hanakanaea Bay, last week's visitors made their way to the Honokanai'a Base Camp. With portable toilets, dormitories lined with bunk beds, a kitchen and dining hall, the camp is the only area on the island that shows signs of modern infrastructure.

A desalination system at base camp produces between 13,000 and 15,000 gallons of freshwater per day, enough for basic water needs like showers and washing dishes. Boats bring in drinking water.

After a quick pit stop, the group climbs into the back of an old pickup truck cushioned with donated pillows and foam pads and rides up a bumpy red-dirt road to the 1,483-foot summit of Pu'u Moaulanui, the highest point on the island. Native Hawaiians once used the island as a spiritual center and navigation marker, said guide Paul Higashino, KIRC's environmental restoration manager.

He added that, on a clear day, onlookers atop the mountain can see not only Maui, Molokai and Lanai, but all the way to Hawaii Island.

From this vantage point, it's not hard to see why the KIRC employees have worked tirelessly to manage and restore the island over the last decade. Now, Kahoolawe looks different from the barren land that was turned over to the state in 1994.

KIRC staff and volunteers have planted native species like a'ali'i, aweoweo, aki aki, kawelu, pili, mamane and other vegetation that is able to survive the island's harsh, dry conditions.

Before the military bombings at the beginning of World War II, the island was used as a penal colony and a ranch. As many as 50,000 goats roamed the island during a 200-year period from 1793 to 1993, even through and after the bombings, destroying vegetation and undermining soil.

Restoration staff members have since eradicated the island of the goats, using what they call a "Judas goat." Hunters trap one goat and attach a tracking device. Because goats are social animals, the Judas goat leads hunters to other goats, which are eradicated. The Judas goat is left alive and continues finding other goats.

Staff members also continue work to re-



**Top:** County employees climb the stairs from the beach to Honokanai'a base camp on Tuesday.

**Above:** Because of Kahoolawe's low-lying elevation, decimated soil and historic use by the U.S. Navy as a bombing range, shrubs make up most of the vegetation that survives on the island. The Navy removed munitions from about 75 percent of the island before turning it over to the state in 1994.

**Left:** Paul Higashino (right), head of the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission restoration program, talks with Mayor Alan Arakawa and his wife, Ann, about a shrine located at the summit of Pu'u Moaulanui, the highest point on the island at 1,477 feet above sea level.

The Maui News / EILEEN CHAO photos

move overgrown kiawe that they suspect was brought to Kahoolawe by birds.

"The goal is to return Kahoolawe as its native Hawaiian dryland forest," KIRC spokeswoman Kelly McHugh said.

But more work needs to be done, and the KIRC can't do it alone.

Until now, the commission has drawn its funds from a \$44 million trust fund the federal government set up when it turned over the island to the state. The funding came with the caveat that the island would be transferred to a future sovereign Hawaiian nation.

This year marks a significant crossroads for the commission. Unless state lawmakers approve a new funding source, it is expected to

run out of money for its operations by next year. It might be forced to shut down restoration efforts and discontinue volunteer and visitor trips to the island. KIRC's demobilization would also cease patrol of the waters around the island, possibly opening its pristine waters to overfishing.

"Why is it important to continue restoring Kahoolawe's native landscape, preserving its cultural resources, monitoring its marine environment and protecting the public from the inherent dangers of unexploded ordnance? (That) is what funding the KIRC will do," commission Chairwoman Michele Chouteau McLean said. "Restoring endangered and native plant and bird habitats, protecting impor-

tant cultural sites and ensuring the continued health of Kahoolawe's waters are valuable to all of us."

Arakawa agreed that Kahoolawe is a historic, traditional and cultural asset to the county and the state.

"After all that it has been through, we can't abandon Kahoolawe," Arakawa said. "We as a county and state have a responsibility to help restore it. Millions of dollars and untold thousands of hours have been spent on restoration efforts. This would all be for nothing if the KIRC cannot continue its work."

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This aerial file photo shows a crater known as Sailor's Hat created in 1965 when the U.S. Navy detonated 500 tons of TNT on Kahoolawe to simulate the effects of an atomic blast.

Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission photo