



KA WAI OLA

THE LIVING WATER of OHA

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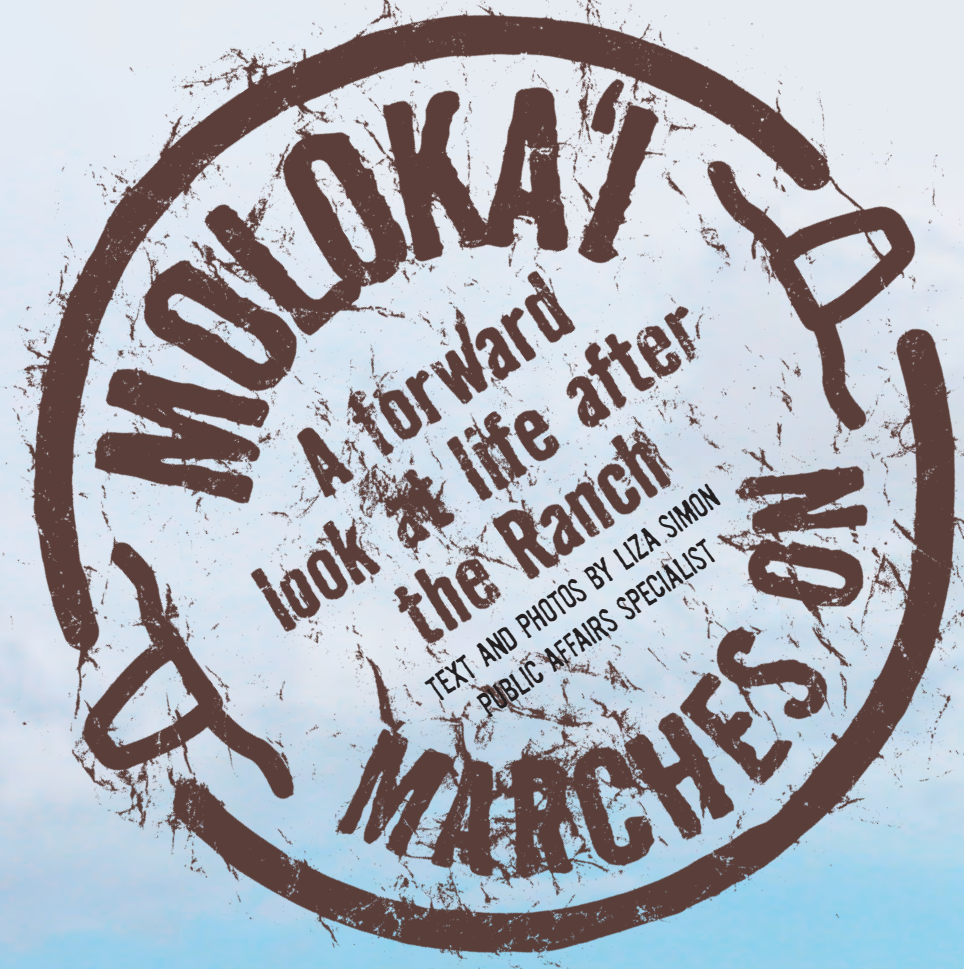
What the future holds for Moloka'i
after the pullout of Moloka'i Ranch

MOLOKA'I MARCHES ON

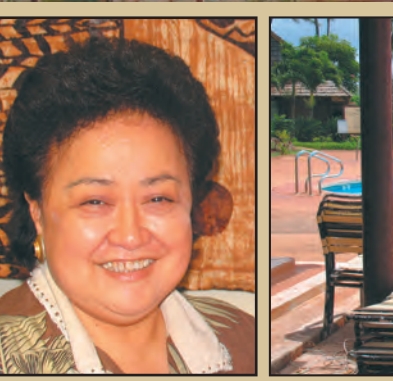
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No more room at the Moloka'i Lodge. - Photo: Liza Simon

Anything Can Happen on Molokai!



PEOPLE OF MOLOKA'I: activist Walter Ritte, homesteader and agritourism Farmer Kammy Purdy, ranch employees Eddie Mersberg and James Limo, County business specialist Annette Pauole Ahakuelo, shuttered places: golf course pool filled with sand; movie theater goes dark.
- Photos: Liza Simon



The question of what's next for Moloka'i didn't go over well with the soon-to-be-laid-off Moloka'i Ranch employees cleaning out furniture from the quaint cottages of Kaupoa campgrounds and stacking the cargo into a caravan of company trucks about to rumble off on the steep dirt road to some unknown warehouse destination. "There's been a lot of disagreement," ventured ranch maintenance supervisor Ray Hiro, letting his exasperation show. "Every time you propose something, there's opposition to it. This is still the best place to live; I just wish the activists hadn't been so loud or I wouldn't be wondering if my three kids will live here too."

Then one of those "activists" showed up to join his co-workers for a last potluck gathering at a sparkling beachfront hale, ignoring the icy stare he got from the lone official of Moloka'i Properties Limited, which inherited the name of the century-old cattle farming operation. About the community uproar over the plan by the Singapore-based corporation that owns the ranch to donate thousands of acres to a public land trust in exchange for approval to develop luxury homes at Lā'au Point, Anakala Pilipo Solatorio, the noted ranch Hawaiian cultural specialist, said: "Too much was left in the dark. What they said was good ... but how they said it ..." He paused to shake his head. "Now it's up to every individual to pound the question of what is pono for Moloka'i."

The question of what is pono for Moloka'i has been pounded on the tiny island for many years. Moloka'i residents who have been working on opposite sides of development issues live side by side, as described by kupuna education specialist Ruth Manu, who talks over breakfast at a popular Kaunakakai drive-in: "We go the same church, same market, same parties, same funerals. We love each other. We know how to pray for each other." Manu also sighed heavily,

echoing an observation that you hear a lot on Moloka'i: "The pilikia over Lā'au is not just about us. It's something happening everywhere. But at least here, you lose your job, you can hunt, fish, get help from family. We don't beg to use our own parks." Does this mean that in hard times Moloka'i can be a model, not a victim? Many residents harbor this hope, recognizing that whatever conflict Lā'au has stirred has meaning that goes far beyond tiny Moloka'i's shores.

At a public meeting room on a rainy night, longtime activist Walter Ritte, opposition leader to the Lā'au Point plan, said with a quick shrug that he will accept some blame for the ranch shutdown, "but it's part of the struggle when you fight for something." The mixed bag of people that filtered into the room are supporters of the Buy the Ranch movement. As an alternative to the ranch Master Plan, they began digging through almost 40 years' worth of Moloka'i planning documents for ideas to help the community become prosperous owners of the sprawling 65,000-acre ranch but still preserve the resources for subsistence farming, fishing and gathering – activities that a recent University of Hawai'i study shows have more viable economic significance on Moloka'i than on any other Hawaiian island. Another priority for the group is preserving scarce water resources. A recent USGS study supported activists' claims that Moloka'i's wells would not support the ranch's planned development at Lā'au.

"We have the skills and resources to live within our means on Moloka'i, if we stay away from industrial tourism and keep Moloka'i, as is. That is why the elders will say the island will care for itself," Ritte said, reeling off the previous corporate pullouts survived by Molokaian: the pineapple companies, then the shutdown of a Sheraton hotel. Plus, residents have fended off several outsider incursions before they had a chance to begin operations—like cruise ships, Ritte said. "Maybe it's something spiritual that comes from following the fish in the

water, the animals in the mountains. We are independent but we have connection to what's good for us."

Participants at this evening's meeting wanted to nail the scope of island agribusiness so that potential investors in their Buy the Ranch plan "will know what they are getting into and not get blind-sided." Some nit-picked at tedious definitions of agriculture under state zoning laws. Veteran homestead farmer Kammy Purdy explained why the attention to such detail is necessary: luxury homes can be disguised as "gentleman's farming estates" with the mere addition of an orchard or animal pen, she said, adding that loopholes like this made activists suspect that the ranch's Master Plan for agricultural lots could lead to more unwanted luxury home development. An older man who identified himself only as Uncle Moke interjected that the Buy the Ranch plan should support educating children about "the meaning of agriculture in Hawaiian culture." Purdy agreed, but also said, "It takes a special person to run a farm these days."

The Buy the Ranch plan has one major booster. U.S.-continent-based UPC, which runs a wind farm on Maui, is willing to commit \$50 million to the purchase of the Moloka'i Ranch. In return, the company would lease about 10 acres on the island's west end to erect windmill turbines for generating electricity to transmit to O'ahu.

The lead on the wind farm project, Moloka'i attorney and longtime resident Karen Holt, acknowledges some of the arguments against the UPC plan, including the fact that it would create only a dozen or so jobs – hardly replacing the 120 lost by the ranch's shutdown. But the benefits of wind farm, Holt said, include its negligible impact on west Moloka'i's scarce water resources. "Moloka'i is often called the last Hawaiian island, yet we have the largest percentage of foreign owners," she says. "So decisions are being made in corporate boardrooms that affect us. This is the opposite of home rule that will allow people to see their grandchildren here for years to come."

But is the ranch for sale? There is no indication of this from either the Singapore boardroom or from ranch headquarters in Maunaloa. The 2007 parent company's annual report states: "Moloka'i Properties continued to remain cash positive by the sale of further non-strategic subdivided land." It also says the company sold "a large agricultural parcel to Monsanto" – the agricultural biotechnology development company that becomes the island's largest employer with the ranch's demise.

A persistent concern of many Moloka'i residents is that the ranch might sell to land developers who don't have the sensitivity that the current ranch CEO, New Zealander Peter Nicholas,

showed by engaging in community dialogue. Others take at face value the ranch's recent public statement that it would simply mothball, or "landbank," its assets.

In fact, as a sign of the ranch's continued support of the Moloka'i community, some residents hail the ranch's donation of 1,600 acres around 'Ilio Point, including an ancient adze quarry and access to resource-rich tidal pools and native plants for traditional gathering purposes, to the Moloka'i Land Trust. "Regardless of what happened to the Master Plan, the ranch went through with this offer that was made last year," says land trust board member Stacy Crivello. "This an expression of Moloka'i's passion to protect pristine and open space."

While this is good for Moloka'i, Crivello believes that the Master Plan was a better solution because it offered not only a more sizable public land trust of 65,000 acres but also jobs in the private sector. "Activists want support from the government to protect Moloka'i's natural resources, but for this to happen you need the private sector to work hard and pay taxes," said Crivello, adding that Master Plan's failure has become a wake-up call to a hard-working silent majority. "They come out on the highway sign-waving to show support for those 120 families affected by the ranch layoffs."

At the Kuha'o Business Center in Kaunakakai, Moloka'i's spirit of enterprise has been thriving, said Annette Pauole-Ahakuelo, manager of the county-run agency. Since the ranch's closure, she's been very busy with company employees who have long nurtured ideas to strike out on their own. Besides helping them draft a business plan, she dispenses Moloka'i-style advice: "Good business often travels by word of mouth. Show your integrity and you will never starve on this island."

Among her many success stories, Pauole-Ahakuelo, who laughingly calls herself a "business cheerleader," counts several "mompreneurs." She recently helped a grandmother get a patent on a "keiki seat contraption." She also assisted homestead farmers in their effort to certify organic Moloka'i-grown produce so that its higher cost at the supermarket will be justifiable to consumers.

Pauole-Ahakuelo came back to her family roots in Moloka'i after time away on the continent and dove right into "Moloka'i 101," as she puts it, by participating in the Master Plan meetings. "It made me realize how blessed we were to have people who invest heart and soul in the land they truly love." But she is also worried by the economic downturn she saw on the mainland. "What happens globally affects Moloka'i," she said. "Even the most entrepreneurial people are going to be caught in a squeeze with no savings during a recession."

Plans for helping the laid-off ranch employees are being

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