



The Long and Winding Road to Ka Iwi Coast's Preservation

By Elizabeth Reilly, Livable Hawaii Kai Hui

The transcendent experience of making your way along the Ka Iwi coast will forever remain – thanks to the residents and visitors alike with persistence and aloha.

Preservation of Ka Iwi is a generational community vision spanning more than four decades in Hawaii. Finally in 2017, the community championed the preservation of the remaining mauka parcels of East Oahu's Ka Iwi coastline – one of the most beautiful stretches of undeveloped land in Hawaii.

The spirit of these lands helped create and maintain a synergy that enhanced our efforts to protect the wild and natural beauty of Ka Iwi, mauka to makai. After all, as the benefactors of those that came before us, there is a responsibility of being duty-bound to honor them and do our part. The journey was not smooth, but worth every moment.

Understanding roots

The Ka Iwi Coast is seven miles of scenic coastline along the south shore of Oahu between Kawaihoa (Portlock) to Makapuu. The last two privately owned properties, Queens Rise and Mauuwai, and vulnerable to development, are known as Ka Iwi Coast Mauka Lands - comprised of 182 acres rising above Awawamalu (aka Alan Davis beach) mauka of Kalaniana'ole Highway between the Hawai'i Kai Golf Course and Makapuu.

In the early 1970s, community groups and residents advocated to keep the Ka Iwi coast undeveloped. And, through the years there have been conservation victories including protecting Awawamalu from a proposed luxury residential and resort development.

Friends of Queen's Beach raised public awareness about preservation of undeveloped areas in the early 1980s, eventually evolving into Save Sandy Beach. Some of those early-on activists included Ursula and Bob Rutherford, Phil Estermann, Shirley Lum, Anna Hoover, Betty Daly, Art Mori, Eve Anderson, Rusty Weaver, Gary Gill, and the late David Matthews.

In 1998, the State of Hawaii condemned and bought Queen's Beach for incorporation into the proposed Ka Iwi State Park, while the city completed the purchase of the land near Sandy Beach Park, which had been earmarked for development.

In 2006 when developers announced plans for a complex of 180 “resort cabins” on the remaining undeveloped mauka ridges above the Ka Iwi Coast, Dave Matthews passed on the torch of vigilance, supported by his mentorship, and the Ka Iwi vision was rebooted with rebranding under the name Ka Iwi Coalition. It was important to get the public to advocate for mauka to makai protection and not settle only for ocean front protection.

Many community members vowed to protect the mauka lands and to complete the final part of the protection of the Ka Iwi coast. The focus was to create in-roads where communication or community efforts had become blocked and to generate a synergy. The continued support and mentorship of the above named iconic community activists would ultimately be a huge advantage, but there would still be a road of many twists and turns.

Thinking strategically and seize opportunities

When the Ka Iwi mauka landowner revealed an interest in developing cabins on their preservation zoned land, it was discovered there was no trigger for community inclusion. At the time, as per the Land Use Ordinance (LUO), the landowner needed only to apply for a “conditional use minor” to proceed with development. The question was asked; would this set precedent for all preservation type land on Oahu? An opportunity arose to work with the late Peter Rappa (an environmental activist), the Honolulu Department of Planning and Permitting (DPP) and the City Council to initiate the change so cabins on preservation type land would call for “a conditional use major” and community inclusion would be necessary.

Along with elected officials in 2006, the “No Cabins on Ka Iwi” campaign was organized in response to the proposed 180 resort cabins and recreational facility.

When the landowner re-applied for the cabin development, the law had changed and they were mandated to have community input – which ended up never occurring. In a rare meeting with a member of the Utah-based development team, it was discovered they were actively pursuing development because the makai land was still zoned urban not conservation.

When researching zoning verification with Senator Fred Hemmings, it was found the urban designation that happened during Kaiser development days (when they envisioned the area as a mini Waikiki) had never been transferred to conservation land after the condemnation, court cases, purchases and land swaps. In 2010, the opportunity was seized to work with elected officials on the reclassification of the makai lands to conservation designation. Though a tedious process, the partnership between the city, state and community created a unification.

Next, there was a focus on building a relationship with the landowner through communication and information about Ka Iwi. Through ongoing research a Federal indictment against the company was discovered and an attempt to reach out to the property owner and request first rights to purchase the land was made. Unfortunately, no communication came back – this time.

As court proceedings were tracked it was noted things were not going well for the Utah company, and once again a letter was sent but this time to a receivership contact about community interest in purchasing the Ka Iwi properties. They did respond this time but they wanted to sell the entire asset portfolio (with numerous mainland properties) in a lump sum – another hurdle and distraction.

Engaging partners

Eventually, the property portfolio was broken up to sell off individually and another letter of intent was sent and Ka Iwi supporter reached out to The Trust for Public Land (TPL). The group worked closely with Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and its Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) to take title of the land - with Livable Hawaii Kai Hui holding a conservation easement and helping raise funds to steward the land.

But, because of certain circumstances and the type of real estate transaction coming out of Utah, the State decided not to take title and Livable Hawaii Kai Hui stepped up after getting approval from DLNR's Land Board. TPL provided the expertise for raising public and private funds and assisted with securing \$3.5 million in funds from state and county and it was up to the community to raise \$500,000, in a few months, toward the total \$3,650,000 million acquisition price and stewardship endowment.

Involving community

A small grass-roots campaign formed that included community activists for Ka Iwi from previous decades to high school students that also cared deeply about the cause. Through door-to-door canvassing, community meetings and events, sign waving, support from local businesses, news coverage, direct mail and online giving, the community raised more than \$600,000. Donor Randy Ching stepped up early with a \$100,000 donation to lead the campaign and then two anonymous donors gave \$50,000, and the majority of the funds raised were small, but critical, donations of \$25 to \$200.

Ka Iwi work continues. The goal of helping to complete the vision to protect land in perpetuity, mauka to makai along the 7-mile stretch of the Ka Iwi coast has been achieved. The community, through Livable Hawai'i Kai Hui, now owns and will steward two parcels mauka of Kalaniana'ole Highway (State Highway 72) between the communities of Maunaloa (Hawai'i Kai) and Waimānalo. DLNR will impose deed restrictions, and the City and The Trust for Public Land (TPL) will co-hold a conservation easement (TPL as the Administrative Holder) over the properties to ensure that the lands will remain undeveloped.

In addition to preserving the sweeping natural views, ancient Hawaiian cultural sites will be protected and there is potential for a native and seabird habitat. It took a mountain of people almost half a century to save the mauka lands – and finally the pristine beauty of Ka Iwi will forever remain as nature intended and for all generations of kamaaina and visitors to enjoy.

Elizabeth Reilly is the founder of Livable Hawai'i Kai Hui (LHK Hui), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, grassroots community organization serving East Honolulu since 2004. It strives to promote sensible growth and respect for the land. Its mission is to uphold the integrity of the East Honolulu Sustainable Communities Plan, which sets guidelines for sensible development respectful of cultural and natural resources that make East Honolulu a unique place to live. In 2014, through a partnership with the State, City and TPL, the group purchased Hawea heiau complex and Keawawa wetland. In 2017 LHK Hui with its Ka Iwi Coalition team worked with the City, State and TPL partnership to purchase two Ka Iwi mauka parcels totaling 182-acres to complete the 40-year community vision to keep the entire Ka Iwi coast in its natural state. LHK Hui also has the kuleana of caring for special places throughout Maunaloa including Aloha 'Āina O Kamilonui Nursery and Pahua heiau in partnership with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. www.hawaiikaihui.org