

Interior Secretary Watt Incurs Wrath of Isle Environmentalists

By Lee Gomes

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LIKE most of their Mainland counterparts, local environmental groups have been enraged by the actions of James Watt, President Reagan's secretary of the interior, and predict that his continued tenure in office could have serious environmental consequences, not only on the Mainland, but in Hawaii as well.

Beyond hurling personal invectives at Watt ("He's the classic bastard," said Anna C. Kaohelauiii of the Hawaii Sierra Club), environmental leaders here say that issues as diverse as state parks, humpback whales and endangered species could, in one way or another, be threatened by Watt's actions.

The anti-Watt chorus from the environmental movement has been conducted ever since he was first

picked by Reagan for the Cabinet. Watt's previous job involved suing the Interior Department on behalf of developers and ranchers in the West, and environmentalists testified against him at his confirmation hearings, saying he had a callous disregard for the lands he was soon to be in charge of protecting.

Since then, they have said that their worst fears have been justified.

Many of Watt's controversial actions and proposals, such as gutting the Clean Air Act, relaxing strip-mining controls, allowing off-shore drilling near choice beach spots and opening up vast tracts of federal land for commercial exploitation, do not directly affect Hawaii. The air here is for the most part smogless and the state has few, if any, mineral resources to tap.

BUT environmentalists say that there are a number of ways that Watt's policies could affect Hawaii. They also say that all facets of the Interior Department's work, such as the local office of the Fish and Wildlife Service, could be touched by Watt's legacy.

George Balazs, a University of Hawaii marine biologist and the president of the Hawaii Audubon Society, warned that even career Interior Department employees who disagree philosophically with Watt may be

forced to follow his lead because of bureaucratic pressures.

"Unless they fall into line, they'll be shifted to some two-bit refuge in the backwaters of Kansas," he said.

Local environmentalists listed several areas of specific concern they have about Watt and Hawaii.

One is the proposal to cut back on the federal land and water conservation fund, which is used to buy lands for both federal and state parks.

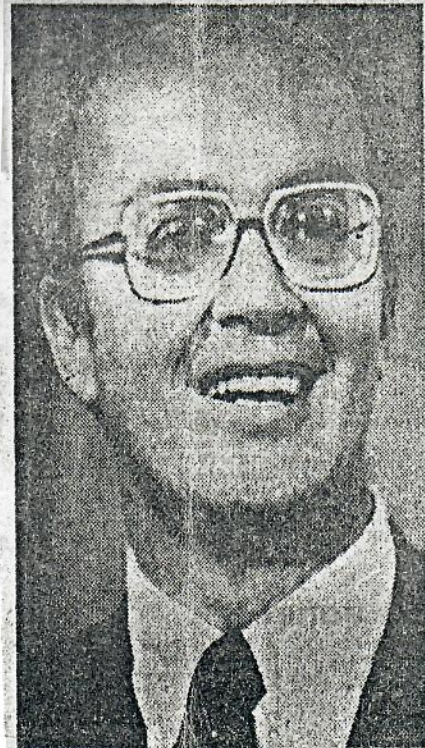
For example, the state's purchase of Maialekahana Bay for a park, as well as many others, was made in part through those federal funds, and there is fear that the state parks program could be impeded under Watt.

ANOTHER Watt proposal that has local environmentalists concerned involves a simple definition

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James Watt

Isle Environmental Groups Incensed by Watt's Actions

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— what constitutes "harm" to an animal.

Until recently, harm has been defined as actions that could threaten the animal's habitat as well as the animal itself. But Watt has proposed redefining harm to mean a literal, physical injury, which Balazs said would prevent actions such as his group's recent court fight to halt the spread of feral sheep on the Big Island that were eating the nesting trees used by the palila bird.

On that same topic, Sue Difloure, of the local Greenpeace office, said Watt's proposals to open up areas off the Alaskan coast for oil drilling could affect the growth cycles of the humpback whales, which can frequently be seen from these shores.

Only 20 humpback calves are born each year, she said, and they feed in the areas that Watt has discussed for oil exploration. "If they feel crowded, maybe they'll move to less desirable feeding spots where they won't be able to get the body fat needed to survive," she warned.

Hawaii figured prominently in one Watt policy that received national publicity.

Since taking office in January, Watt stalled on listing 41 species of Oahu tree snails as endangered, even though they qualified for the designation under federal law.

The Environmental Defense Fund, a national group, threatened to sue Watt to force him to include the

snails, and this week, the 41 species were added to the list.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS say they are afraid that Watt's inaction on the snail issue until faced with a potential court fight indicates that he is insensitive to the larger question of saving endangered species, of which Hawaii has more than any other state.

Another area that some see affected by Watt is the move toward a Law of the Sea Treaty.

Scott Allen, of the Law of the Sea Institute here, said there was "a real possibility" that the United States would pull out of negotiations toward a treaty, and said he believes that Watt was among the men making decisions for the U.S. government on the issue.

Most of the other Western industrialized nations will probably continue with the treaty process, Allen said, which could mean that the United States would be the only major Western nation not signing a key world document.

That could affect the prospects for a Hawaii-based, deep-sea mining industry, an idea that has frequently been touted by state officials.

Allen said that companies interested in ocean mining want the United States to be a signator to a Law of the Sea pact so that they can be assured of stable and amicable relations with other countries that are part of the treaty.

BEYOND the specifics, local environmentalists see Watt as something other than the environmental moderate he describes himself as.

"Congress set aside lands for the future. But Watt wants to exploit them all now," said Kaohelauii. "That kind of degradation can't be repaired, unless we want to pretty it all up for the second coming of Christ."

(The reference is to Watt's now infamous remark, made during his Senate confirmation hearing, that "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.")

"The wilderness has value in its own right," she said. But for Watt, "nothing is sacred. Not a single shred of balance has been evident. It's a radical turnabout in public policy."

Another environmentalist said simply, "He's messing up so many things that it's hard to come up with a concise list of what he's doing that's harmful."

The boards of directors of most local groups have not yet adopted formal positions on Watt's work to date. But leaders of the varying groups said they had no doubt that an official position, once taken, would be highly critical.

They also have been helping the Sierra Club in its nationwide effort to gather a million signatures on petitions seeking Watt's removal.

Kaohelauii said there is "quite a bit of awareness" here about both Watt and her group's petition drive to oust him.

BUT she admitted that, "The petition drive is probably not going to get him fired. It's kind of an awareness thing. As his policies go through, more people will start squawking. Eventually, he is going to be such a political liability to the Republican Party and to Reagan that they will have to get rid of him."

There have, though, been at least two benefits to the environmental movement since Watt took over. Officials at the Sierra Club's national office in San Francisco have reported that membership in the club, as well as donations, are at all-time highs, for which they credit Watt.

And, as Kaohelauii said, "We haven't had anyone to kick around for a while. I've never seen as many environmental cartoons as I have in the last three months."