

Molokai

# Gate To Kawakiu Beach On Molokai Is Open Again — For Now

Access was restricted by Kaluakoi Outfitters for months on the Molokai Ranch property.



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By Jack Kiyonaga  / May 12, 2023

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The public has regained access to the only road leading down to Kawakiu Beach after a private hunting company closed it off due to concerns over public safety and poaching.

Roughly 100 Molokai community members took action last weekend, cutting the chains and removing the gate. They then walked to the beach in a march organized by well-known Molokai activist Walter Ritte.



**MOLOKAI**

The gate preventing vehicle access to Kawakiu had been a point of contention among residents for months. The dirt road is owned by Molokai Properties Limited, a Singapore-based company also known as Molokai Ranch that controls 56,000 acres on Molokai.

“The main message is to you guys in Singapore: It’s time to come to the island of Molokai. [If you’re going to sell](#) (Molokai Ranch), we’re the guys who want to buy it,” Ritte told the group gathered Saturday.

This is not the first time Ritte has opposed the gate at Kawakui.

In 1975, Ritte and other activists, including his wife Loretta Ritte, led a movement seeking improvements in rights for Native Hawaiians. Then-Mayor Elmer Carvalho opened the access gate to Kawakui with the perhaps fate-tempting words, “may this gate never be closed again.”



Walter Ritte, with megaphone, has long opposed the closing of the access gate at Kawakui. (Courtesy: Jack Kiyonaga/2023)

According to Ritte, this previous movement helped create constitutional protections for Native Hawaiians.

“Rights of access came from Molokai in 1975. It’s important for us to understand that,” Ritte said during the protest.

Beyond being a location for cultural practices such as hunting axis deer, fishing and gathering salt and opihi, Ritte explained that Kawakiu is also a historic and sacred place.

A recent study published by archaeologist Marshall Weisler found housing sites, fishing shrines, stone mounds, walls and grinding slabs at Kawakiu. One site had the largest collection of fishing tools ever found in Hawaii.

Molokai residents at the protest explained that they grew up coming to Kawakiu with their families. From these trips, they had learned the best spots for lobster, the types of fish in the area, how to pick salt from the rocks, and more.

“Today is another example of what we need to do in order to make sure that we can always feed our families,” Ritte said.

However, not all Molokai community members were as enthusiastic about the march.



Maui County Council member Keani Rawlins-Fernandez says Molokai residents “won’t be locked out of our home.” (Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021)

“I have friends on both sides of the gate,” said Molokai resident Chad Kaika Moran.

Born and raised on Molokai, Moran recalled shooting his first buck at Kawakiu, but acknowledged how complicated the issue can be.

Maui County Council member Keani Rawlins-Fernandez likewise weighed in on the effect of the demonstration on the larger Molokai community.

“The rural lifestyle that we have maintained on Molokai is one of pilina to our home ... being locked out would sever the next generation from being able to have that relationship with place. Our culture is place-based,” said Rawlins-Fernandez.

The uniqueness of life on Molokai makes decisions about land access personal.

“Most of us look at Molokai, not just one area but the entire island, as being our home, especially if we are from multigenerational families,” explained Rawlins-Fernandez. “We won’t be locked out of our home.”

For Rawlins-Fernandez, Saturday wasn’t a protest but rather an assertion of constitutionally protected rights for Native Hawaiians.

“They cannot redefine the law. They can attempt to rewrite history and impose their own interpretation of what the laws are, but the courts are very clear,” said Rawlins-Fernandez. “The law allows for traditional and customary practices such as hunting and gathering in ahupuaa where your kupuna hunted and gathered.”

Beyond hunting and access rights, previous incidents with trucks driving on Kawakiu Beach and trash being left have also alarmed Molokai residents in the past.

At the protest, Ritte responded to this well documented complaint.

“We’re trying to convince the next generation not to go over there and drive their trucks in the sand joy riding, because it’s a historic place. It’s a sacred place. Our kupuna are buried there. Our job is to make sure that we teach our young people this is not a place to fool around,” said Ritte.

Both Molokai Ranch and the police had been made aware of the march, according to the protest organizers. Participants were encouraged to stay on the road itself while walking down to the beach.

Adorning the dirt road to the beach were signs warning of hunts in progress. According to Ritte, he had received a letter saying that a hunt was planned for the day of the protest.



A group walked the road to Kawakiu Beach during a demonstration Saturday. (Courtesy: Jack Kiyonaga/2023)

While Molokai Ranch owns the land, the 3,000-acre property encompassing the Kawakiu gate is leased by Kaluakoi Outfitters – a private hunting company offering “an experience of privacy and exclusivity while hunting in paradise,” according to its website.

Kaluakoi Outfitters President Cathleen Shimizu explained that “the necessity of the installation and closure of the gate was to stop the illegal entrance of people continually breaking the law by poaching and putting the public at risk on our leased area.”

Shimizu cited continued access to Kawakiu by way of hiking the coast or by boat, as well as damages caused by driving on the beach as supporting the decision to close the gate.

“We have respect for all, most especially for those in this community,” said Shimizu. “We have never been disrespectful in our pursuit to operate a business that understands the importance of respecting the culture and resources we’re gifted with.”



Shimizu's family has lived on Molokai since the 1930s and are generational hunters on the land.

A spokesman from MPL confirmed that hunting safety was the primary reason behind closing the road to vehicles. MPL also emphasized that they organize hundreds of community hunts every year.

While MPL is working on reinstalling the gate, they are allowing temporary walking access to the road as long as pedestrians stay on the dirt path.

Saturday's protest concluded with the dedication of an ahu and a swim at the beach before the long walk back.

For now, the road to Kawakiu remains open.

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