

TRAVEL | HAWAII

Native Hawaiians confront billionaire's megayacht in Hawaii

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

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A megayacht owned by a commercial real estate billionaire made stops in Maui and Hawaii Island before arriving at Molokai.
Courtesy of Paul Hanada/Paul Hanada

Native Hawaiians confront billionaire!... 3:56 1x Everlit

Hawaii residents confronted a \$250 million megayacht after it moored off the island of Molokai earlier this month. As the yacht's passengers took a dinghy to Kaunakakai Wharf, a handful of Molokai residents were waiting for them, blocking access to shore.

The 387-foot yacht, known as “Liva O,” is owned by German American billionaire Stephen Orenstein, a commercial real estate businessman. The vessel made stops off Maui and Hawaii Island before it arrived at Molokai, heightening residents’ concerns.

They gathered at the wharf to find out what the passengers’ intentions were on Molokai.

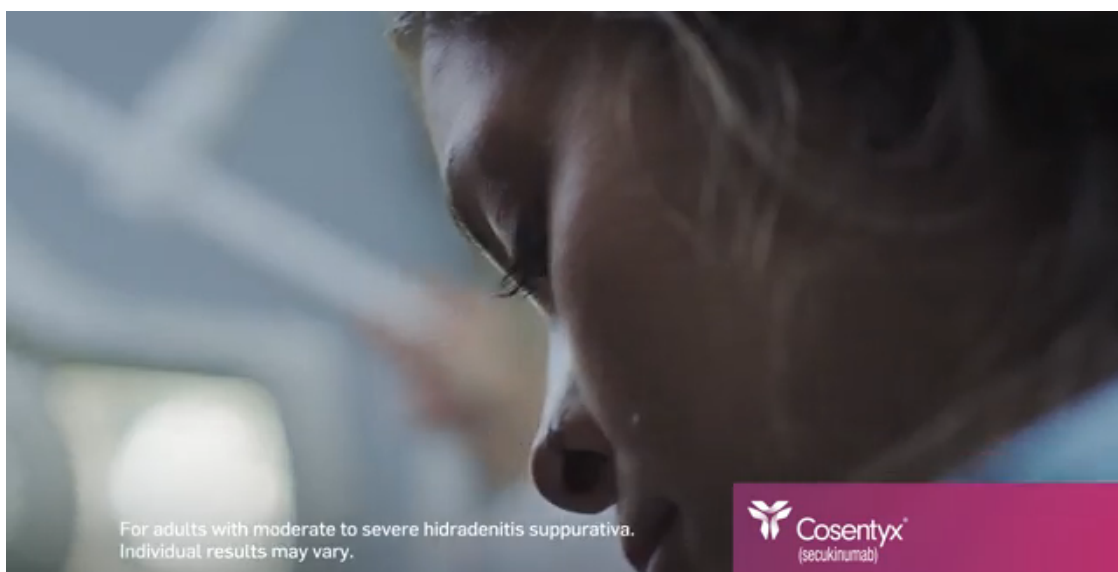
“We told them that we’re very concerned about who’s coming to Molokai, especially when they come on a \$250 million boat,” Walter Ritte, a longtime Native Hawaiian activist and Molokai resident, told SFGATE. He was part of the group “Kahoolawe Nine,” which in 1976 landed on Kahoolawe to protest the military bombing of the island.

A crew member told Ritte that the passengers were there for a one-day excursion. Aware that the megayacht was making stops at different ports around Hawaii, Ritte talked with the captain through a walkie-talkie, asking if they were creating a tour or if this was a one-time deal.

“People are very nervous about ships leading tours to Molokai. That’s why we all gathered at the wharf,” Ritte said. One of the concerns is overtourism, as large ships can bring a lot of people to the island at one time. Another major worry is how a ship’s anchor can damage the coral reef.

The captain promised Ritte that they were not there to start a business. The passengers then proceeded on their day-long excursion, and later, the yacht left the island.

“I’m assuming they hang out with other guys with big yachts. We’re hoping that the message goes out that Molokai is very touchy about bringing tourists to Molokai,” Ritte said.



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Hawaii residents have expressed increasing concern with billionaires, such as Mark Zuckerberg and Marc Benioff, who own land on the Islands. Investment firm Guoco Group, which is part of a conglomerate founded by billionaire businessmen, owns Molokai Ranch, which encompasses one-third of Molokai. The landowner has been absent for over a decade, leaving its buildings, golf course and lodge abandoned like a ghost town.

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Molokai, nicknamed the “Friendly Isle,” is the fifth largest island in the main Hawaiian island chain.

Shobeir Ansari/Getty Images

The encounter with “Liva O” is not the first time Molokai residents have confronted a megayacht. In 2017, a group of Molokai residents, including Walter Ritte, blocked a luxury yacht’s access to Molokai, turning them away. “We want to keep Molokai, Molokai,” Loretta Ritte, Walter’s wife, said at the time.

The Hawaii Division of Boating and Ocean Recreation told SFGATE that yachts planning to moor off the Islands must let the relevant counties know ahead of time. They are allowed to anchor up to 72 hours as long as it's in a designated [Ocean Recreation Management Area](#). "Passengers can come ashore on any island that is under the State of Hawaii," the division said.

Ritte, however, is worried about tourism numbers. "We've seen what happened to the other Islands. Tourism is out of control. There's no control," he continued. "So we want to make sure that we start trying to control [it]." He, however, is not as concerned about visitors flying over from other Islands since there's only one small airline flying there, which inadvertently caps the number of people arriving to Molokai by plane.

"Right now, I think we have tourism under control," he said. "We're going to make sure that they don't expand the airport, that they don't [increase traffic] to our harbor. All those kinds of things helps keep Molokai the way it is."

Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.

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