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HAWAII

# 50 Years On Kahoʻolawe: Inside The Journey To Rescue Hawaiʻi's Target Island

The goal isn't just to heal the environment, activists say. It's to forge an island where Hawaiians can reclaim their culture.

By Marcel Honoré, Kevin Fujii / January 26, 2026



Boats carrying Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana crews arrive before dawn at Hakioawa Bay as Haleakalā’s silhouette appears in the distance on Maui. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

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**H** AKIOAWA —Five decades after George Helm, Walter Ritte and seven other activists landed west of this gusty bay, defying the U.S. Navy and helping spark a Hawaiian reawakening, two dozen of the volunteers they inspired work hard and fast to restore terrain once riddled with bombs.

There's plenty to get done in the precious two days they'll have on island with limited food and supplies, all hauled ashore in waterproof bags through heavy surf. They dig native plants into Kaho'olawe's scrubby northeastern foothills, strategically placing them so the seeds might scatter in the valley below.

They lash a tarp over an old rain catchment tank that'll be needed to help keep those plants alive. They also deliver ho'okupu — offerings in the form of a chant — at an ancient fishing shrine in the rocky remnants of a seasonal fishing village that thrived prior to Western contact.



The sunrise illuminates kua, or leader, Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



PKO members deliver a sunrise chant, or oli, during a trip marking the 50th anniversary of the Kaho'olawe Nine landing. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Kua C.M. Kaliko Baker talks about the significance of Hale o Lono, one of numerous cultural and archeological sites on Kaho'olawe's northeastern side. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Kawai Lu'uwai, from top, Kaipu Keala and Kaulu Lu'uwai secure a tarp on a water catchment tank. They removed a second tarp that had been damaged. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Volunteer Kainoa Pestana plants native vegetation on the hills above base camp in Hakioawa. The planting site was chosen to prevent erosion and allow the trade winds to carry seeds toward camp. Haleakalā sits across the 'Alalākeiki Channel. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



A volunteer prepares to release seeds upwind from the group's base camp so they might scatter back toward that area. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

The landing of the nine activists led to a movement guided by one of its key participants, Noa Emmett Aluli, dubbed Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, or PKO, a nonprofit.

Over the past 50 years, several thousand of its volunteers have braved uninhabited Kaho'olawe's harsh elements. They work carefully within posts that indicate the ground beneath them has been swept for unexploded ordnance, or UXO.

The group's members have made all these trips not just to seed the dry, caked landscape but to revive Hawaiian practices on an island they hold deeply sacred.

“The camp, the sustainable work that we’re doing over here, even just building this compound ... this is not an end in itself,” PKO member Kaipū Keala said. “It’s really about the ‘āina (land) and the akua (deities) that dwell in it.”

“The ceremonies allow us to keep in mind the bigger picture, and it allows us to continue to strive for excellence,” he said. “It’s about things that are much bigger than ourselves.”

Occasionally, despite the posts, old casings and bombs appear anyway as the soil shifts and erodes. By conservative estimates, the Navy hit the island with tens of thousands of tons of ordnance as part of its own nearly 50-year testing and training campaign there, from 1941 to 1990.

Its subsequent \$400 million cleanup, from 1994 to 2004, swept 75% of the landscape for UXO, with most of that done on the surface. Thus, everyone treads cautiously and follows a cardinal rule: If you see something on the ground that you didn’t drop, don’t pick it up.

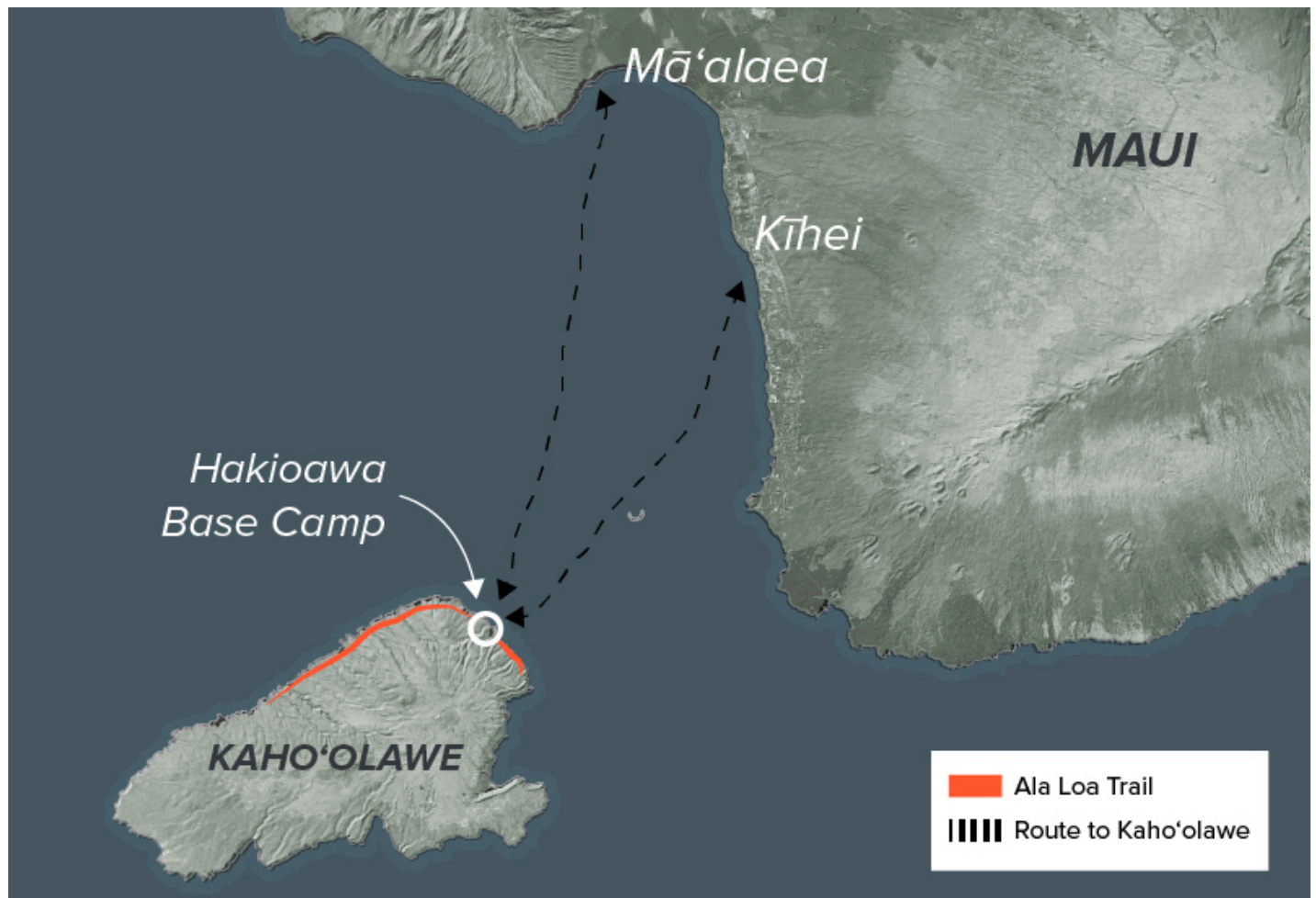


The sun illuminates PKO volunteers as they walk to another heiau, or temple, after conducting protocol for sunrise chant. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Kaho'olawe Nine, whose 1976 landing brought national attention to long-standing plights faced by Hawaiians, PKO looks to ramp up its efforts and expand access to the island.

Specifically, it aims to complete in the next five years or so a rock-lined trail that encircles the island on areas clear of UXO.

That path, dubbed the Ala Loa, will open up new coastal landing sites, they say, to accelerate the environmental repairs and expand cultural practices across Kaho'olawe. So far, just over half of the pathway is finished.



Just getting to Kaho‘olawe requires extra commitment. The island has no docks or piers, so walking ashore inevitably requires some swimming.

Volunteers board fishing boats before dawn at Mā‘alaea Harbor and Kīhei’s boat landing to cross the ‘Alalākeiki Channel, where conditions often get pretty rough from the strong winds that funnel through there. As the boats approach the coast, the volunteers recite an oli, or chant, in Hawaiian, asking the island’s permission to come ashore as the sun rises.

An inflatable Zodiac raft, which PKO members call “the Zodie,” joins the boats on their bumpy trip across the channel. Its operators chant back to the volunteers that they can come ashore.

The volunteers switch in groups of four or five from the boats to the Zodie, which motors them as close to shore as the tide permits. They jump in.

Once everyone’s in the water, the Zodie makes several more trips to the boats to gather their ukana — gear and supplies — stored in waterproof bags and garbage bags sealed with duct tape.



PKO kua, or leader, CJ Elizares, top, moves gear onto the Zodiac raft that was needed to access the island. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

The bags go in the water, too. Everyone forms a line that extends to the Zodiac and pass the gear back to the beach in as orderly a fashion as the crashing waves allow.

When it's time to leave, the volunteers wake before dawn and do the whole process in reverse.



Volunteer Kaulu Lu'uwai swims gear toward the Zodiac raft as the group prepares to depart Kaho'olawe. Without a dock or pier, getting to Hakioawa base camp requires getting wet. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

The nonprofit organizes about one trip a month between March and October for members and volunteers to work on Kaho'olawe. Those who don't live on Maui pay their own airfare to get there. They also pay some \$200 in costs to cover the bus and boat trips, plus their meals.

Despite five decades of intense bombing, some 3,000 archaeological sites and features remain across Kaho'olawe's wounded landscape. The island was added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1981, almost a decade before the Navy stopped target practice there for good.

Heiau, or temples, ko'a, or shrines, and petroglyphs dot terrain that's never been developed as the other Main Hawaiian Islands were, offering a unique window to

the past. Many of those sites, including the stone outlines of nearly 200 houses, overlook the 'Alalākeiki Channel at Hakioawa by the PKO basecamp.

The group stewards these sites, and it's where much of its cultural practice flourishes.

Davianna Pōmaika'i McGregor, a University of Hawai'i ethnic studies professor emerita and PKO leader, believes topography helped save the ancient fishing village at Hakioawa. Most of the Navy's amphibious landings occurred on the island's opposite west side, she said, where the terrain was easier to access.

Much of the ship-to-shore shelling also took place on that west side, McGregor said, and the military targeted the center of Kaho'olawe. In 1980, a court agreement dictated that the Navy couldn't bomb the eastern third of the island at all. That included Hakioawa.



PKO volunteers Kaulu Lu'uwai, left, and Kainoa Pestana hang the Hawai'i state flag upon the group's arrival to the base camp at Hakioawa. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

Today, the camp is often boisterously alive with laughter and banter. In other moments, volunteers quietly reflect or solemnly chant in unison, communing with the space around them.

“There’s no roads. There’s no stores. There’s no parking lots,” Craig Neff, one of the group’s kua, or leaders, said hours before departure. “The raw energy is still there.”

One of the main drivers that finally compelled the Navy to let Hawaiian activists legally visit Kaho‘olawe, kua C.M. Kaliko Baker said, was the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act. It forced the Navy to acknowledge the Target Island, as Kaho‘olawe became known, was an important cultural site, too.

When they were negotiating the terms of the 1980 consent decree, the Navy essentially asked, “What’s your Christmas? What’s your Easter?” Baker said. “When do you have to come on island?”

The answer centered on Lono, the Hawaiian deity of agriculture and rain. Practitioners now ask Lono to bring over the clouds and rains from Maui during what’s known as Makahiki, a roughly four-month stretch of Hawai‘i’s rainy season, to help heal the landscape.



A tattoo mimics fresh native plants going into the ground. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Volunteer Kimberly Patterson plants an endemic Pa'u o Hi'iaka. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Kua CJ Elizares, from left, Lopaka Aiwahi and Nāmaka Whitehead prepare an area surrounded by invasive kiawe trees for planting native plants. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Volunteer Anna Palomino plants a native 'ākulikuli. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Volunteers prepare native plants at Hakiowa. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



A threatened endemic maiapilo grows from the side of a river wall upstream from the PKO camp. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

Pilgrims march across the center of the island on a UXO-swept route during rituals that are kapu — sacred and private. Only the participants themselves are meant to be there.

However, in the early 1980s Navy personnel accompanied the practitioners during Makahiki rites, Neff said, despite the participants' objections. Relations between PKO members and military personnel at that time, he said, were tense.

The Navy presence was “super-distracting,” he recalled. “But for us, that helped us focus on what we were doing, blocking out all of this so that you could complete your ceremony as pono (properly) as possible.”

Eventually, he said, lawyers for the practitioners, including Republican former state Rep. Cynthia Thielen, helped persuade the Navy to stay away during those rites.

Navy crews in the early 1980s also placed a suit of armor about the size of a garden gnome, Neff said, at the entrance of their camp near the PKO's camp. The message was clear, Neff said: He and the others were to keep out.

"It was their akua," he joked of the diminutive knight, using the Hawaiian word for deity.



Kua Craig Neff at the rock where military crews once placed a miniature suit of armor between the Navy and PKO camps. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

"Just by their presence, it really is easy for this thing called hatred to come up. And I was young," recalled Neff, who was 21 at the time.

“I thought, you know, you’re fighting. People have died for this island,” he said, referring to activists George Helm and James Kimo Mitchell.

Helm and Mitchell were also in their 20s when they disappeared under mysterious circumstances in 1977. The two men were last seen leaving Kaho‘olawe on a surf board in heavy seas for Maui after trying unsuccessfully to find and extract other activists who’d hidden there in protest during Navy operations.

Helm was a charismatic musician and rising community leader. He played a pivotal, early role in the effort to stop Naval operations on Kaho‘olawe and restore access there.



Memorial plaques for James Kimo Mitchell and George Jarrett Helm Jr. overlook ‘Alalākeiki Channel. Mysterious circumstances still surround their disappearance nearly 50 years after their deaths. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

“If all of us Hawaiians can go over there and touch it,” Helm once said of the island, “we all come together.”

Today, a memorial for Helm and Mitchell rests on a cliff overlooking Molokini Crater and South Maui, not far from the spot where they disappeared.

“It’s not like how we come up today. It’s a super heavy in-battle feeling, yeah?” Neff said. Those feelings eased as he got older and as access to Kaho‘olawe improved, Neff said. He grew past any hatred of the Navy’s presence. “Aloha prevailed.”

In 1990, the Navy ceased operations there. It handed the island back to state control. Aluli, who died in 2022, and his fellow PKO members forged ahead.



A kū'ula, or stone carving, of the deity 'Ai'ai sits atop a fishing ko'a, or shrine, and faces Maui at sunrise. Kahuna Sam Lono brought the carving there in February 1976 for a ceremony to cleanse the land of military

abuse, PKO leader Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor said, and reconnect with the spirits of the land. The carving was taken by military personnel in 1977, McGregor said, then later turned over to the Bishop Museum. The museum recently returned it to PKO. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

Building the Ala Loa path is arduous and risky. Since 2010, the group's more experienced and qualified volunteers have carved some 17 miles of paths around the island, kua CJ Elizares said. That includes 10.6 miles that hug the coastline.

A UXO specialist with the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission accompanies the volunteers. The commission oversees the island for the state and is helping PKO complete the Ala Loa.

The path's planned routes are swept three times with metal detectors, Elizares said, as crews gradually cut down invasive trees and remove the vegetation. All of the work, according to commission Director Michael Naho'opi'i, occurs on surfaces cleared by the Navy.

Despite all the precautions, crews still stumble upon UXO, Elizares said, including decades-old white phosphorus canisters that never ignited. When that happens, they flag those spots, back up 200 feet, and pick a new route forward.

The difficult work is needed, Elizares said, to link up access to the 69 or so ko'a, or shrines, and other archaeological sites scattered around the island. The path is culturally significant, Baker added, because it represents Lono's journey around the island.

PKO looks to do eight trips a year dedicated just to Ala Loa construction, Elizares said. That should finish the path in the next five years.



Kua Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor walks up a maintained trail between warning pylons. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Kaipu Keala and Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor walk on a trail built and maintained in areas cleared of unexploded ordnance. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



Most of the area at Hakiowa has been cleared of UXOs. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)



PKO members ascend a trail built in areas cleared of unexploded ordnance. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

After a full day's work, the PKO members huddle in the solar-powered light of the Hakioawa base camp to discuss ideas for a 30-second television spot they'll air during the upcoming Merrie Monarch Festival, one of Hawai'i's premier cultural events.

What message should they send the public after 50 years of struggle, tragedy, triumph and restoration?

The conversation lands at Hawai'i's active U.S. Army sites, including the Pōhakuloa Training Area on the Big Island, whose 65-year state leases are soon up for renewal. Gov. Josh Green wants to secure \$10 billion in federal investment in exchange for the Army's continued use. He's expressed concern that the Trump administration could seize the lands through eminent domain.

Many activists, though, including PKO members, want to see the Army relinquish those sites entirely. The past 50 years on Kaho‘olawe, they say, are a beacon to show what’s possible.

“Stopping the bombing at Pōhakuloa sounds impossible, right?” Neff said. “This was impossible. So nothing is impossible.”

Lots of ideas get tossed around for the TV spot. In the end, everyone agrees on a catchphrase.

*Not pau yet. Not done yet.*



PKO members Kawai Lu‘uwai, left, and Kaipu Keala burn paper rubbish after dinner. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2026)

*Civil Beat's coverage of environmental issues on Maui is supported by grants from the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, the Hawai'i Wildfires Recovery Fund and the Doris Duke Foundation, and its coverage of Maui County is supported in part by a grant from the Nuestro Futuro Foundation.*

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