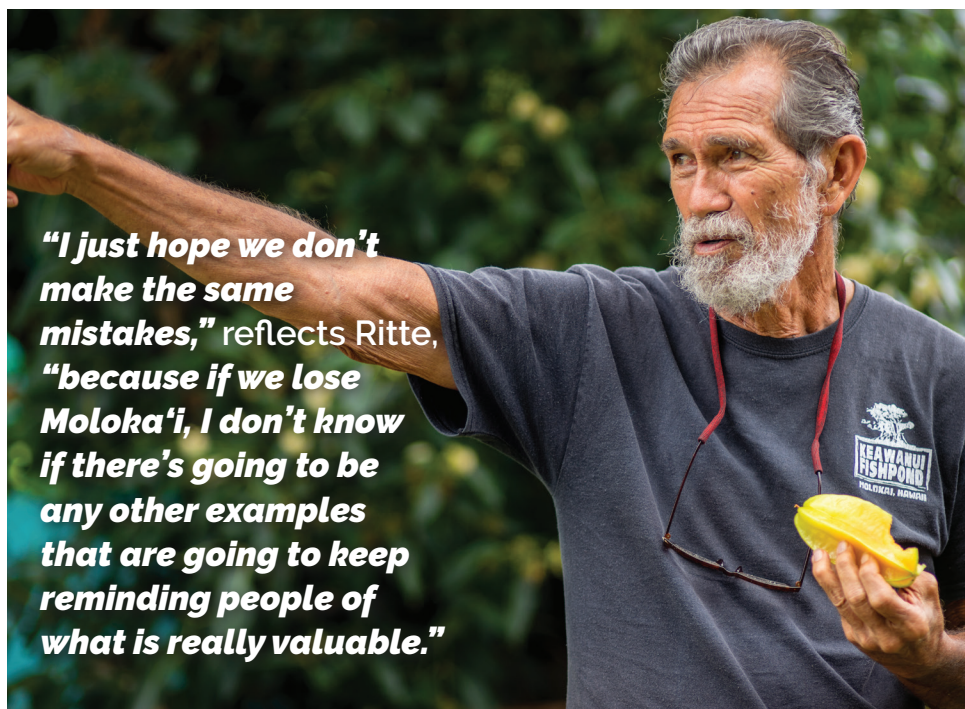


[illegible]WALTER RITTE *by Sarah Yamanaka*



***“I just hope we don’t make the same mistakes,” reflects Ritte, “because if we lose Moloka’i, I don’t know if there’s going to be any other examples that are going to keep reminding people of what is really valuable.”***

Growing up in Hawai‘i, I remember reading and hearing about Walter Ritte throughout the years. An advocate for the rights of the native Hawaiian people, the land and its natural resources; speaking up against overdevelopment; rallying against cruise ships coming to Moloka‘i; ... community organizer and leader, a voice raising the red flag. Ritte is passionate about his beliefs, some say he’s abrasive, even antagonizing.

Regardless of how others view Ritte, he has accomplished much in his lifetime while trying to help the native Hawaiian people.

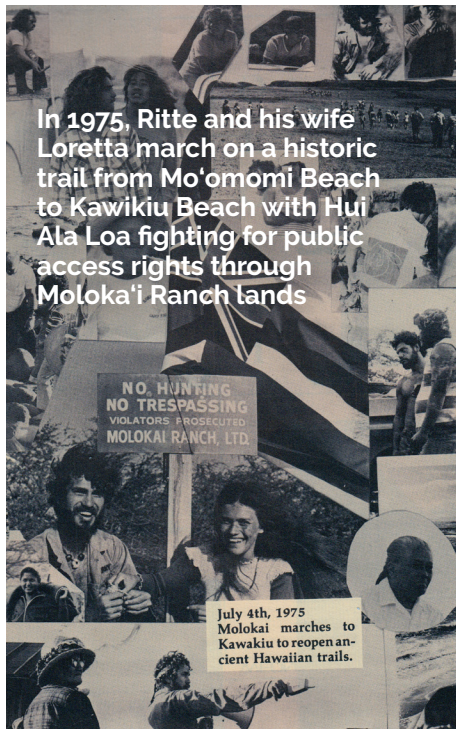
It’s raining in Hō‘ōlehua when we meet Ritte at Kualapu‘u Cookhouse. Sitting at a bench under a tent, he’s wearing a camouflage jacket as if ready to go hunting. I may have expected someone combative, ready to charge, but Ritte is soft spoken with a subtle sense of humor and is knowledgeable about so many issues, as he’s had to be.

After graduating from Kamehameha Schools and spending some time on the

Mainland, Ritte returned home to Moloka‘i in 1965 where he married and began to raise a family. He was intent on feeding his family as a hunter, but at the time, Moloka‘i Ranch was the most powerful entity on the island and owned nearly “... a third of this island, and all of the good hunting and fishing was on their land.”

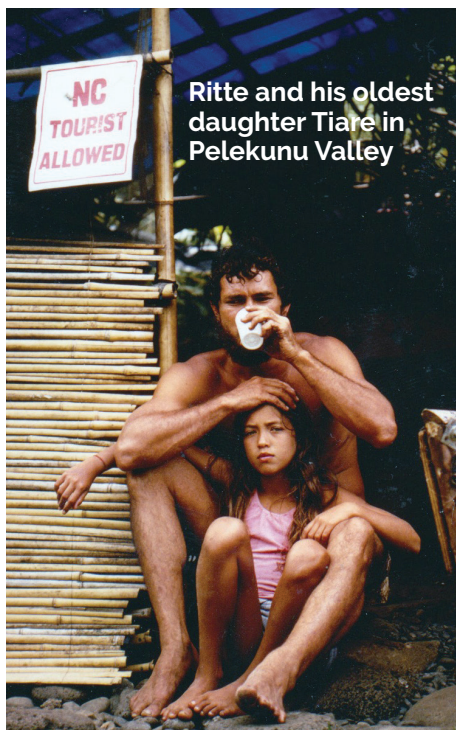
“The problem I was having was I couldn’t go where the deer was going, because for some reason, the deer didn’t understand the ‘Keep Out’ signs,” shares Ritte with a chuckle. “So I followed the deer and went wherever. I was gonna provide for my family doing what I wanted to do everyday. So that conflict with the powers that be made me realize that I had to do something. Then I started talking a lot with our elders (kupuna).”

Ritte researched the area and found that the road the kupuna had taken many years before had once been a government road that had allowed access through ranch lands. So when and why did this open



**In 1975, Ritte and his wife Loretta march on a historic trail from Mo'omomi Beach to Kawikiu Beach with Hui Ala Loa fighting for public access rights through Moloka'i Ranch lands**

July 4th, 1975  
Molokai marches to  
Kawikiu to reopen ancient  
Hawaiian trails.



**Ritte and his oldest daughter Tiare in Pelekunu Valley**

government road close for public access? In response, Ritte and others organized the first Hawaiian march in 1975 with about 200 residents to get access rights for all.

"Back then in 1975, it was like heresy," says Ritte referring to the march. "We were supposed to smile and dive for quarters when they threw them in the water at Honolulu Harbor, and just keep doing the hula.

"So we started this whole movement about access, and it was important for us on Moloka'i because ... I could feed my family. I could get protein with fish and deer ... then I could grow the starches, sweet potato, vegetables, and stuff like that. So I was able to provide for my family two-thirds of everything I needed just through my own ability and access.

"That (march) put me on a path that I stayed on until today," explains Ritte. "There were a lot of conflicts and we always solved the conflicts by organizing ourselves. We didn't want to become like Waikiki. We were very nervous because we had no voice, and the west side was going to be just like Waikiki, that was the plan. So we fought the development."

Then one day Ritte got a call from Maui cultural specialist Charles Kauluwehi Maxwell, Sr., who asked Ritte to join a group going to Kaho'olawe. As most longtime Hawai'i residents are aware, this journey undertaken aboard several boats on January 4, 1976 was big news and gave rise to the "Kaho'olawe Nine."

"My job was to hunt and feed all the guys that were going to be there," says Ritte. "That's the reason I went. I didn't know the politics of Kaho'olawe.

"By the time we got to Kaho'olawe, I was seasick," he says with a small laugh. "Maxwell stopped us right before we got to the island. We're sitting there in the boat, and I was getting more seasick. Then the helicopter and the Coast Guard came, hovered over the boats, and said we need to turn around, that



### Speaking out to protect natural resources at the State Legislative Rotunda

they had taken pictures of all the boat numbers and were going to confiscate the boats. So Charlie said, 'Turn around and go back.' And I'm like, I'm not going back. I'm gonna go on that island because I was sick as a dog, and I didn't come all this distance just to turn around."

So nine people out of the group — Ritte, Noa Emmett Aluli, Kimo Aluli, George Helm, Ian

Lind, Ellen Miles, Steve Morse, Gail Kawaipuna Prejean and Karla Villalba — jumped into the media boat that had just arrived from Maui amid the chaos of helicopters and U.S. Coast Guard boats, and caught a ride to the island. Ritte and Emmett Aluli left the rest of the group to check out the island, and from their higher vantage point, saw the Coast Guard arrive and take the others.

"I told Emmett, 'I think we better hide because they're gonna come looking for us,'" says Ritte, "so we went into a little ravine, covered ourselves in grass. The helicopters flew over us and couldn't find us." This was the start of a three-day evasion, and when both men were finally ready to be found, they were taken off the island in handcuffs.

Following this incident, Ritte made additional forbidden trips to Kaho'olawe, and in 1977, he and fellow

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Protest march through Waikiki to protect Mauna Kea

activist Richard Sawyer spent 36 days there surviving on goats, coconuts, 'opihi and fish, while putting out plastic to catch moisture for drinking water.

It sounds like something right out of a movie as Ritte explains how he and Sawyer hid in the valleys as soldiers passed by searching for the two men. The two in turn followed the military, eating their C-rations and other leftovers. At night, military planes used thermal imaging equipment above the island searching for the two, but no luck. The military believed the men had somehow left the island.

"Our wives kept telling them, 'No, they're there,'" says Ritte, "but they started bombing again."

Eventually Ritte and Sawyer ended up in maximum security prison for six months.

"The lesson I learned from my time in prison," says Ritte, "is that when I was outside of prison, and was trying to explain to people what we were doing on Kaho'olawe, I had a hard time explaining what we were feeling inside. But when I went to prison, they understood what I was feeling. They knew exactly what and why aloha 'āina was driving us to save Kaho'olawe, so we had many deep and big time discussions."

A game changer for Ritte was the Hawai'i Constitutional Convention held in 1978. Referred to as "the People's Con Con," it brought forward many female delegates, as well as a more racial and ethnic diversity among the delegates that many felt better reflected Hawai'i's diverse population.

After getting a call from delegate Adelaide "Frenchy" DeSoto to "come over," Ritte realized he could actually help to enact change to the Constitution of the State of Hawai'i for the Hawaiian people.

"I called my wife," he says, "and told her to send some clothes, 'I'm gonna be here for a while.' I stayed a month or so." DeSoto asked what Ritte wanted to do. He said, "I want to provide access for Hawaiians in the Constitution." So he worked with lawyers to draft Article XII Section 7, which codified native Hawaiian cultural and gathering rights. They also created the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) and made Hawaiian the official language of the state. Ritte says it passed with less than five dissenting votes.

This experience sparked Ritte's interest in politics, but instead of diving in, he took his family to live in Pelekunu Valley in the early 80s where the first Hawaiians



Ritte at ease with family on his homestead property where he practices subsistence living

had constructed thriving taro terraces. He returned to his roots to learn how the Hawaiians survived and says that those years in the valley were the best years of his life.

In 2012, however, after much deliberation, he reluctantly moved his family out of Pelekunu to run for the At Large seat for OHA after hearing radio reports that said people believed OHA was created in order for the state to control the Hawaiian people. He ran because he felt he had to prove those people wrong. In the end, however, Ritte says he was voted out by the OHA trustees.

As one of the “Kaho’olawe Nine,” native Hawaiian activist and musician George Helm was one of the leaders of the Protect Kaho’olawe Organization. Ritte recalls Helm’s goal that he often shared with others: “Who better than the people of Moloka’i to determine their own future.” Those words had always stuck with Ritte.

“He (Helm) was really adamant that we need to become our own county (Moloka’i is a part of Maui County along with Maui and Lānai), so right now that’s one of my major focuses,” says Ritte. “We have been told that you cannot become your own county because you don’t have the funds, the income to pay for the infrastructure, police,

the firemen. We’re dependent so much on the government.

“I’m thinking to myself, ‘We can. We don’t need to depend on big government for our survival. We depend on ourselves, our subsistence talents and our abilities to work hard and do whatever we gotta do,’” maintains Ritte, slowly and thoughtfully.

“We’re doing a lot of organizing of young people to be the next leaders,” says Ritte, “and switch from playing defense — we’ve been playing defense for 34 years now. We’re holding classes at Maui Community College and have 14 students going into our second semester. Our goal is to train them to become the new leaders for Moloka’i.

“The reason why we’re setting it all up, what’s tipping the scale,” says Ritte, “is that Moloka’i Ranch is now for sale. We’re talking 50,000 acres.

“So I said to the class, ‘We cannot wait to see who’s gonna buy it; we don’t know if it’s good or bad. We need to be proactive, come up with a plan, and let whoever’s out there know that when you buy this land, you’re not just buying land, you’re also buying into a community, into the future of this island.’ So that’s what we’re working on.

We went through the process of the



Moloka'i Community Plan with the county, so a lot of that, land designation and land use areas, are falling in line. So it's a matter of us making clear ... because they (developers) don't want to buy it, and then enter into another 40 years of battle. We have that reputation, that we're not just going to sit there and be manipulated."

There are always two sides to every story, but it's due to vigilance by Ritte and the community that Moloka'i still remains a truly unique place compared to the other islands. Corporations can easily provide jobs for the community, however, let one in, and others could easily follow — O'ahu and Maui are two perfect examples. I ask for his thoughts on the rampant development on the other islands, especially O'ahu.

"I know what they have," responds Ritte carefully, "and it's not what we want, and I know the story of how they got there. I don't want to make the same mistakes, and do the same things. So the lessons that I try and teach our class is to make sure that you have the voice or you have the control.

You cannot give that away, so you have to be really careful who you bring in."

It's not that Ritte doesn't understand what families are experiencing. He does. He understands that people are struggling, making it difficult to think of anything beyond the need to survive or feed ones family. He's been there. But he encourages everyone to broaden their vision, see the bigger picture, and think about the future of Moloka'i. "People love this island," he says, "whoever lives here, they love this island, otherwise they would've gone to look for jobs elsewhere, and a lot of them have."

Ritte talks about having two economies. "If you're stuck with one economy, the cash, you're stuck," he asserts, referring to nine-to-five jobs that corporations could bring. "So here, I could go out hunting and eat steak. I could go on a boat or just grab my speargun and bring in a lobster. I could have steak and lobster for free. For me, it's like, put that in your head and keep it there because you think you don't have, but you have.

"The future of this island is going to be how do you balance the two economies — cash and subsistence. The state does not want a subsistence economy because they cannot tax the sharing. This is the only island that has a subsistence study, and it proves how much people here depend on it, what they depend on."

In his mind, Ritte has all the components set up to accommodate the two economies, and says people have to keep thinking out of the box. He acknowledges that it's going to be tough and require hard work in the beginning, but once things fall into place, Moloka'i can become an independent county.

Whenever it rains, the red dirt runs into the surrounding shallow waters and covers the reef because there's no deep forest ground cover to soak up the water. Everyone is aware of it, but has never done anything about it. So Ritte says that a top priority for whomever purchases the former Moloka'i

Ranch lands will be to plant a forest, a project that will create jobs. The forest will then hold onto rainwater so it will stay long enough in the ground to replenish the aquifers and there will be less runoff.

He says the four major valleys — Halawa, Wailau, Pelekunu and Waikolu — have wall-to-wall taro terraces all intact. The structure is there, as well as all the water that's needed, but there's no one to work the terraces. Ritte wants to join forces with the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Hawaiian Studies' program to train people who will work in the valleys where so much of the island's starch can be produced, but he says they should have a Hawaiian background and practice the traditional way of growing taro.

"We have 14,000 acres of one continuous reef system from this side of the island all the way to the east," says Ritte. "Our fishponds? In order for us to be successful with our fishponds, we need a fish hatchery. Then we can stock all of these ponds with fish. Double the output, traditionally. So, educational infrastructure for the valleys for starches, some fisheries infrastructure where we can produce protein ... that will give Moloka'i a solid economic foundation and help our food security problem.

"We want to be an independent island," says Ritte, "so that's where the county is going to be important. And when we do set up our county government, we cannot depend on that government ... WE have to be independent and care for our families so that we don't have to have so much taxes in order for the government to help us survive."

So, really, what can people do if they want to effect change?

"To me, the whole thing, especially in the Hawaiian community," shares Ritte, "is they don't want to vote for many reasons. Number one is they don't believe that they're Americans. You know, 'You guys came over here and overthrew my Queen, now you want me to play your game? I'm not going to play your game.' You're stuck.



**In his mind, Ritte has all the components set up to accommodate two economies that will be important for the future of Moloka'i**

"I wanted to survive so I ended up at the Constitutional Convention," he continues. "I made a Constitutional amendment that allowed us access. So, you can grumble, but until you do something about it, nothing's going to change. Democracy is here. Capitalism is here. And it's been manipulated to your disadvantage. If you do nothing, then you're still going to be a slave. And I think for me, you have to get involved. You cannot strong arm these guys. They're ready for you, so you have to learn ... the ... system," emphasizes Ritte.

"The reason Moloka'i is like this is because we learned the system. We did our homework, learned the system and we did what we had to do to use it to our advantage. And you can, if you learn to organize. Moloka'i is still pretty much independent, and all we have to do now is build our economy. That's the process we're going through now."

In closing, I ask Ritte if there's one thing, thinking back on all the issues he's encountered, that's been the most frustrating.

"When I started the classes, I told the students that the one thing they're going to have to learn is to be flexible," he says quietly. "Just because we say we're going to do this on Monday doesn't mean we're going to do it on Monday. The weather changes, the river flows another way

... you have to be flexible. So that's how I approach my life ... the river never flows straight, so I just go with the flow. Everything I do influences something, and I use it as a positive.

"It's like, people who think independently, who don't know where that line is, cross that line and end up in prison. So all the guys I work with, I teach them to know where that line is, and when you come right up to that line, gently push it, but don't cross it. And then you keep moving that line, right? So what was like, heresy, back in the '70s, is now mainstream. You just have to be patient. Just keep moving that line."

Ritte practices what he preaches. On his homestead property, he shares his process of permaculture, rotating crops and avoiding mono crops, drip irrigation and no fertilizers. He has a bountiful food forest producing taro, avocados, 'ulu, papaya, kukui nuts, guava, mountain apple, citrus, mangoes, bananas, starfruit, Hawaiian sugar cane and more.

On his agenda nowadays is building a case for Moloka'i to become its own county; working on water, a key issue for the island's future; and organizing and unifying the native Hawaiian people. Ritte's passion for the island and its people is never ending. He also says that today's native Hawaiian people are discussing international laws reaching back to the overthrow of the constitutional monarchy. But that's a discussion for another day.

