

From Shore to Valley, O'ahu Surfriders Join

the Fight to Protect the Spirit of Waimea

By Michelle Slade

Waimea: not only is the name synonymous worldwide with surfing, it instantly conjures up visions of the lush tropical environment unique to the Hawaiian Islands. Compelling Waimea is an intoxicating charm for surfers and recreationers, with its centuries-old natural beauty that sweeps from high up on the hills of O'ahu, cascading down through the verdant Waimea Valley to the eternally blue Pacific shores of Waimea Bay and world-famous big waves.

A cultural and archaeological jewel, the 1,875-acre Waimea Valley was caught up in a difficult landownership battle, and at risk of being developed by its owner, New York investor Christian Wolffer. With 1,575 acres of undeveloped land that includes a large waterfall, streams, native forests, and a world-class botanical garden with rare and endangered plants, the Valley is also home to 78 known archeological sites while 80% of the Valley is yet to be surveyed. For 40 generations Waimea Valley was in the hands of the Hawaiian religious elite, the kahuna nui. With development, all this would have been at stake.

Surfrider Foundation O'ahu was involved in an awareness campaign that in early 2006 was successful in convincing the Honolulu City Council and the Mayor to realize that public sentiment would obstruct development in Waimea Valley.

Scott Werny, co-chair for Surfrider Foundation O'ahu, describes Waimea Valley and the potential hazards that would be wreaked if development were pursued.

“It's considered a sacred valley by the Hawaiians with many cultural spots,” says Werny. “The narrow valley feeds a river that runs right through a beautiful, large white sand beach into Waimea Bay, which is where the

famous ‘Waimea Bay’ break is. Development upriver would likely lead to compromised water quality through runoff and sewage spills, more litter, compromised beach access through crowding, as well as threatened reefs and aquatic life. It is well understood in Hawaii that the health of our economy and lifestyle is linked to the health of our natural resources.”

In brief, developer Wolffer acquired WaimeaValley in 1995 by assuming then-owner Attractions Hawaii’s \$12 million mortgage. In 2000, Wolffer put the Valley up for sale at \$25 million, later lowering the price to \$19 million. In 2001, he put the property under bankruptcy protection. In 2002, the City moved to acquire the land through condemnation, depositing \$5.1 million in escrow with the courts to begin the process. In 2003 the Audubon Society took over management of the Valley operating the Waimea Valley Audubon Center.

Wolffer subsequently proposed a settlement in which the City would own the Valley’s lower 300 acres and he would own the rest, with the option to build an eco park on the city’s portion and divide his 1,5735 acres into as many as eight parcels, prompting concerns regarding the development of the Upper Valley.

Just over one year ago, on December 7, 2005, the Honolulu City Council voted unanimously (9-0), to reject the proposed settlement, reversing its 5-4 vote on November 21, in which the Council gave preliminary approval to the settlement (the motivation for agreeing to the settlement was so that the City could secure the 300-acre parcel already being operated as a park by the Audubon Society).

According to reports, the decision really belonged to the more than 70 speakers who told the council in no uncertain terms that the community was ready to take its chances in court. Not one person who spoke at the hearing was in favor of accepting the Wolffer deal. The speakers were backed up by the Audubon Society and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA), which pledged to come up with the money needed to match whatever price a court ruling decreed, a goal the OHA subsequently achieved.

Thanks to advocacy groups such as Surfrider Foundation O'ahu, the Valley is now owned by the OHA and managed by the Audubon Society.

Werny, thrilled with the outcome, says, "Waimea is one of the most famous waves in the world, and known as one of the largest paddle-in rideable waves (without being towed in with a jet ski) in the world. It's a very unique wave that is only rideable when most of the other North Shore breaks are too big to be ridden. It's a fun recreational beach with clean water that needs to stay this way."

PIC: Waimea_1_ss.jpg

CREDIT: None

CAPTION: Traditional living quarters on protected land at Waimea by the Audubon Society.