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Saving our rainforest



SAVING MAUI'S RAINFOREST – The crew (from the left), Alex Michailidis, Jonathan Ciacci, Clinton Fukushima, David Pyle. Crew member Christopher Grasa is not in this photo.

The East Maui Watershed Partnership

BY JAN WELDA FLEETHAM

In January 2002, Alex Michailidis moved to Maui from California and began working as Watershed Managing Coordinator for EMWP, the East Maui Watershed Partnership, which is “a voluntary effort among federal, state and private land owners to preserve and protect the 100,000 acre watershed on the windward side of Haleakala,” according to a brochure Alex gave me when I met with him recently to ‘talk story’ about his job.

He’s very energetic, optimistic, and grateful to be here.

“I first came here as a tourist about ten years ago, and thought it would be wonderful if I could land an environmental job on Maui. About a year ago I saw a posting on the internet for a watershed coordinator and applied,” Alex said.

“I have a deep appreciation for environmental protection initiatives; I tell my crew that there is no more important job on this island than the one that they are doing, because without water, nothing could live here. If the forest goes away, we won’t have fresh water, it’s as simple as that. The continued existence of life itself on this island depends on water.

“From 1991, when the partnership was created, until 2002, each group involved was helping out as best they could, but they were all doing things outside their individual kuleanas, and realized that they needed to hire someone to run this show.

“When I started, we were using offices in Pukalani Square, on Makawao Avenue. Last September we moved here, on Piipholo Road, in the buildings where the NIFTAL Project used to be.”

The partnership is comprised of the following groups:

- County of Maui/Department of Water Supply

- East Maui Irrigation (EMI)
- Haleakala National Park
- Haleakala Ranch Company
- Hana Ranch Company
- State of Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR)
- The Nature Conservancy

Alex says that the objective of the Partnership is to “protect the ecosystem from invasive plants and feral animals. The axis deer do severe damage to native plants; feral pigs accelerate erosion problems, and cause valuable soil to wash down into the ocean; areas that they dig up become prime ground for alien weeds to come in – miconia, kahili ginger; they can rapidly take over an ecosystem.” And, in addition to that, “mosquitoes can breed in feral pig wallows, and spread avian malaria and pox, diseases that have devastated Hawaii’s native birds in many lowland areas.”

Alex’s job consists of things such as writing grants to bring in funding for the project, hiring staff and doing performance reviews, procuring office and field supplies, scheduling crew operations and helicopter

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flights, making sure the crew receives training, and coordinating all the different organizations involved.

But, what he and his crew of – currently – four people, all hired in October 2002, are mainly doing right now is building a fence.

And this is not your average backyard or pasture fence. You can't just drive in or hike in easily to the areas where they're working. They have to be flown in, in helicopters (thanks to Windward Aviation and Pacific Helicopters for transporting the crew, by the way), and the terrain here is rarely flat. Most of us are familiar with the deep gulches on the windward side of the island; imagine manually hauling in metal fence posts, tools and rolls of fencing wire (I saw them; they're huge; they weigh 150 pounds each, Alex said) and then proceeding to build a fence, usually in very rainy, muddy, steep and slippery areas.

"We're primarily focused on fence building above 3,500 feet on the windward side of Haleakala. We will ultimately have a 10,000 acre area, the heart of the watershed, fully enclosed," Alex said.

And, when that's done, that whole area will be protected as well as possible, and can begin to regenerate and thrive. "The plants that naturally occur in a native Hawaiian rain forest are ideally suited to the collection and distribution of fresh water," Alex explained, saying that "watersheds serve as sponges; the plants anchor the soil, hold it together; they pull water out of the air, and the native trees can serve as umbrellas to keep the soil from eroding."

Alex says "We're really not a restoration project, replanting native plants and things like that, at least not initially; our function is to protect the forest. We don't deal with water rights or allocation; we're not politicians. If we don't protect the forest, there won't be any water to fight about."

And he wants to make sure that credit is given to each of the landowners involved, saying that they are all "very motivated. This project would not be a success at all if it weren't for the full cooperation of each of the landowners."

And he also mentions specifically Haleakala National Park, "for their invaluable mentoring and guidance; they have provided so much help in training the

To contact Alex or find out more, call (808) 573-6999, or go to Coordinator@EastMauiWatershedPartnership.org on the internet. You can also write to them at P.O. Box 431, Makawao HI 96768.

crew; we really appreciate what they've done so far."

The Partnership currently has enough funding to continue for 12 – 18 months.

They need a web site, extra vehicles, "more money, more people to do this type of work all over the island. Hana, Kipahulu, Kaupo, for example, all need crews of at least five to ten people in each area. Our entire crew right now consists of four of Maui's finest," Alex says. "This work needs to go on forever; once the fence is completed, it needs to be maintained and managed indefinitely for this to work."

They haven't done a lot of publicity, but see the need for it and are in the process of hiring a PR person in order to get more exposure and clear up any potential misunderstandings.

"We're trying to work together for the good of the island", Alex says.

There is also a West Maui Watershed Partnership, started in 1999, and now the Leeward Haleakala Watershed Restoration Partnership; things are starting to turn around for the forest areas on this island, and that can only benefit everyone, in so many ways.