

Future depends on land stewardship

By Lea Hong

Our islands and the surrounding ocean, cherished by kamaaina and visitors alike, need consistent funding to ensure that we fulfill our huge kuleana (responsibility) to properly manage Hawaii's precious ecosystems and cultural legacy. And, with our constrained state budget, it's easy to let other priorities take over our responsibility to malama aina (care for land). But kicking the can down the road comes with a devastating price — lives and livelihoods lost, communities in crisis, billions in crisis response.

When we take care of the aina, the aina takes care of us. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. When we do not invest consistently in fulfilling our kuleana to malama aina, we all suffer.

The Care for 'Aina Now (CAN) coalition, composed of multiple organizations and individuals, believes consistent investment in aina stewardship is one of the most economical uses of our state's resources — getting at the root causes of climate disasters like the Maui fires, rather than just treating the terrible symptoms and aftermath.

Today, the state Department of Land and Natural Resources (DNLR) has shovel-ready stewardship projects that if funded, could start chipping away at the deferred maintenance our ecosystems so direly need — a deficit estimated at \$360 million annually. These initial projects CAN rapidly improve our climate resiliency and help prevent future climate disasters.

In West Maui, the forests of Mauna Kahalawai are under an emergency proclamation as deer have decimated forests, jumping over low fences designed to keep out feral pigs. Conservation crews are building higher fences that will protect forests and



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Axis deer are seen in Upcountry Maui near Makawao.

promote healthy soils. Healthy watersheds and soils CAN prevent flooding, run off, and erosion affecting the agricultural and residential coastal communities of Kahului, Waiehu and Waikapu. Healthy forests absorb cloud moisture, increasing freshwa-

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ter supplies. While the fence is nearly complete on the west side of the project, it needs an additional \$2 million to complete the eastern section.

On Kauai, a \$5 million investment CAN support a project at the Mana Plains to install fencing and create fire breaks, allowing the growth of harvestable sustainable native plants such as koa and ohia to create an indigenous agro-ecology for sustainable food and ecosystem services.

Across the state, numerous projects CAN enhance regional community-based coastal stewardship. The projects, totaling \$50 million over five years, CAN restore and preserve beach, dune and wetland ecosystems that provide essential habitat, act as a natural buffer against erosion, flooding and severe storm impacts and protect cultural resources threatened by coastal erosion and inundation.

We CAN also restore ocean-based food systems and build long-term

resilience in Hawaii by supporting community-based fisheries management and restoration of loko ia (Hawaiian fishponds), limu (seaweed) and marine fisheries. With the proper resources and funding, we CAN restore estuarine and coral reef ecosystems and manage Hawaii's marine resources for abundance in collaboration with community-based organizations to tap into their cultural knowledge (traditional ike) and expertise.

Without intervention, several Hawaiian forest bird species will likely be extinct in the next 10 years, including the alala, akikiki, akekee, kiwikiu, and akohekohe. With \$3 million we CAN protect these endangered forest birds and help prevent their extinction. This year is officially ka Makahiki o Na Manu Nahele, the Year of the Forest Birds, and funding for these birds, literal canaries in the climate coal mine, CAN fulfill our kuleana to our feathered friends, aumakua and ohana.

While our state has many pressing needs — and the families of Maui need our support — we urge the Legislature to take the first steps in building consistent funding for projects and programs that CAN put our state on a positive path for the future and prevent future climate disasters, the heartbreaking effects on families, and the economic fallout from crisis response. Together, we CAN fulfill our kuleana to each other and our aina.