

HAWAII NEWS

Hui celebrates Makua Valley's lack of gunfire

By [Rob Shikina](#) · Sept. 28, 2014

Min Soo Pata returned Saturday to Makua Valley for the fifth time in the past year, finding spiritual renewal in the lush valley — an Army reservation — on Oahu's dry northwestern corner.

The 44-year-old restaurant worker from Kapolei said the allure is in the valley's smells and sounds.

"I see it in my dreams sometimes," she said. "It just stays with me."

She was with dozens who celebrated 10 years of no live-fire training in the valley Saturday and hoped to send a message to the military that it should stay that way.

Earthjustice attorney David Henkin, who represents the community group Malama Makua, said the group sued the Army in 1998 to learn what effects live-fire training was having on the land and the people, and to find alternatives.

That led to a court order in 2001 allowing cultural access to the valley twice a month and the requirement for an environmental impact statement. The Army agreed to stop using the range for live-fire training after 2004 while working on the EIS, which still hasn't been completed.

"This is a celebration today of 10 years of peace in the valley," Henkin said, adding that the last shot was fired there in June 2004. "If you've been able to train to go to combat repeatedly and successfully for the last 10 years, then maybe you want to train at Makua, but you don't need to train at Makua."

Before marching with the group from a celebration on the beach to Makua, Henkin protested the Army's decision to not allow the group to enter the site earlier in the morning for preparations, in alleged violation of the court order requiring access from sunrise to sunset.

"It was disrespectful," he said.

But Army spokeswoman Stefanie Gardin said Malama Makua on Thursday requested an earlier entrance but did not respond to the Army's request for more details about why the group needed to enter earlier.

"Given the lack of additional details, the Army did not see justification for incurring additional employee overtime" and kept the later start time, Gardin said in an email.

Inside the valley, visitors were granted access to an ahu, or altar, at the mouth of the valley, only about 200 feet from an entrance pavilion.

"I thought we were going to go a little deeper," said Kailua resident Daniel Smith, who brought his two children to expose them to their Hawaiian heritage.

Henkin said the group normally has access to about two dozen cultural sites, but overgrown grass prevented civilians from visiting those sites, including a set of petroglyphs just feet from the ahu.

Gardin said the grass was overgrown because the Army is working on a memorandum of agreement for cutting the grass after a "programmatic agreement" expired in May. She said an agreement is needed for grass-cutting and any activity that may damage historical sites.

She added that civilians weren't allowed into the tall grass because of the danger of unexploded ordnance.

Henkin said the state declined to renew the programmatic agreement because Malama Makua objected to a clause in the agreement that allowed for the preparation of live-fire training.

He accused Army officials of dragging their feet on getting a memorandum of agreement just for cutting grass.

But Gardin said completing a new agreement involves several individuals and organizations and multiple reviews. She said it was difficult to say when the agreement will be finished.

"The Army is hoping to complete the MOA as expeditiously as possible working with all involved parties," she wrote.

She added that the Army will decide how to balance "stewardship of the land" with training requirements after the environmental study is completed.

"The Army has limited training capability for its assigned Hawaii units," she wrote. "All available Army training areas on Oahu are needed to maintain unit and soldier proficiencies."

Malama Makua member Vince Dodge said the group's access to the valley was short, but deep in meaning because the "aina is not complete" until people are on it.

"When you come into this valley and touch it, she will touch you," he said. "Visitation is key. When it's out of sight, it's out of mind."