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GARDEN ISLAND

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In Our Opinion for Wednesday — May 19, 2004

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• Lehua Island

Lehua Island

A proposal for restoration of Lehua Island would remove feral rabbits who are said to have arrived around 1930, and rodents, from the isolated islet located just north of Ni'ihau.

The island is shaped like a boomerang, and is a nesting ground for over a dozen varieties of Hawaiian seabirds, as well as serving as a beacon of sorts for passing ships.

Officials of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and state Department of Land and Natural Resources are at the talking stage of planning a restoration project for Lehua. A public meeting is set for Wednesday, June 9, where public testimony on the proposed project will be taken.

While the U.S. Coast Guard is in control of Lehua, the reaction of the owners of nearby Ni'ihau will be noteworthy when public testimony is gathered. Will this project be considered a little too close for comfort for the Robinsons of Ni'ihau, who are generally opposed to federal incursions on their land in the name of environmentalism?

There are also similarities to the work being done to restore Kaho'olawe off the coast of Maui, though Lehua is much closer in size and looks to "Rabbit" island off Makapu'u on O'ahu's southeast corner. Restoring an isolated Hawaiian island back to a much more native state is an interesting concept, and one that could work on uninhabited Lehua.

Lessons learned at the Fish & Wildlife Service's Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge can surely be applied to the large number of seabirds who make their home at Lehua. Most human contact to the island comes from the occasional fishing boat from Kaua'i or another island, and Navy vessels working out of Port Allen or Pearl Harbor.

Lehua is a part of Kaua'i County, too, and many will see this project as an extension of habitat preservation work being done in Koke'e and other areas of Kaua'i. Removing all the rats on Lehua, pests who eat seabird eggs, and the swarms of wild rabbits that roam the rocky island, could be quite a task, but maybe in this case not an impossible one.

This proposed plan comes at an auspicious time, with the voyaging canoe Hokule'a ready to leave from Hanalei when favorable winds return. The Polynesian Voyaging Society is using the canoe to explore the isolated islands that run for 1,200 miles past Kaua'i to lonely Kure Atoll. Lehua is in some ways more a part of this isolated part of the Hawaiian Islands than it is of the main islands of Hawai'i like Kaua'i and O'ahu.

Protecting the nesting grounds of Hawaiian seabirds is a worthy goal. Hopefully the plan being drawn up will work for all parties concerned and result in the return of this remote island back to a more native section of Hawai'i.