

Philosopher takes action

Hawaii Green Party Chairman Ira Rohter says he sees hotels and high-rises sprouting and fears the aloha state may be losing some of its charm.

"Look at Los Angeles — in 10 years, that's us," Rohter said. "I see Hawaii being paved over, that's what drives me. We're losing what makes Hawaii Hawaii."

A co-founder of the Greens, Rohter took over as party chairman in 1991.

Despite being a political science professor at the University of Hawaii for 25 years, it took one incident a few years ago to make Rohter decide to turn his fears into action.

While visiting lava fields on the Big Island with his family, he watched "bus load after bus load of tourists tromp across the land."

"It was then that I decided it was time to take a leadership role in the Greens, rather than just being a philosopher," he said.

Since then, Rohter has been involved in numerous projects to preserve Hawaii's resources. He founded the Hawaii Research Program for Sustainable Development and participated in the Environmental Energy Summit last summer.

Development without depletion or destruction of natural resources is possible, Rohter said. He outlined his strategy in his book "A Green Hawaii: Sourcebook for Development Alternatives."

Rohter supports an "ecotourism" strategy featuring small hotels and inns that would minimize the impact on the environment rather than large resorts and golf courses. Continuous, small-scale development is preferable to giant leaps in hotel construction. "There's no way we're going to have mass increases in tourism without massive destruction of human and natural resources," he said.

Both city and state governments in Hawaii ignore input from the public, Rohter said, preferring to maintain their own agendas. Too often politicians make decisions without considering what their constituents have to say, he said.

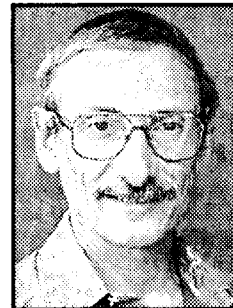
"People are being alienated from government," he said. "If this election does not produce substantially more new faces in government, a lot of informed citizens will just turn away."

Rohter points to the Kau Economic Development Corp. on the Big Island as an example of communities working with government to find solutions to economic problems.

"It was obvious sugar was dying down so they took matters in their hands, and now they're on their way," he said.

Rohter shuns the description "tree-hugging" environmentalist: he has a degree in engineering from Illinois Institute of Technology.

"But I've always been a woods person, from going on Boy Scout outings with my father to taking my family hiking and camping," he said.



Name: Ira Rohter

Age: 55

Position:

co-chairman,
Hawaii Green Party

Occupation: associate
professor, University of
Hawaii

Pastimes: camping,
hiking