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COVER STORY



Battle in the taro patch

In the midst of a statewide taro shortage, a lone Kaua'i taro farmer fights to keep his lease on four acres managed by Hanalei Poi--one of a handful of milling companies bent on monopolizing Hawaii's most meaningful food

BY TEXT BY JOAN CONROW PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICA TANIGUCHI | JUL 27, 2005

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By all appearances, Kaua'i's North Shore is a peaceful, pretty, perfect place. From Hanalei to Ha'ena, the lush landscape is dominated by well-tended taro fields and weathered mountain peaks. It's a realm of rainbows and rain squalls, and equally broad expanses of sky and sea. It seems, to the casual observer, that life here would be so simple, so sweet.

Those who know it know better. The tropical tranquility is merely a veneer that's as idealized and illusive as a picture postcard. Scratch the surface, and a much different portrait emerges, one that is far more complex, troubled--even dark--than would seem possible in this land of luminous light.

Ka'imi Hermosura is more familiar with the details of that shadowy image than he'd like to be. Trained from an early age by his father, fisherman and hunter Vicente 'Bito' Hermosura Jr., to be keenly aware of his surroundings, Hermosura has been a reluctant witness to the near complete transformation of his homeland.

This week

Rail Done Right?

It's news (or should be) when West Oahu's new city councilman comes out unequivocally against the city's \$5.4 billion rail plan. After all, the primary beneficiaries of the embattled commuter train were meant to be Oahu's westsiders, victims of one of the worst commutes on the planet.

Linmark's Leftovers

Rolling the R's author R. Zamora Linmark returns to Honolulu to promote his second novel *Leche*, a compelling and often funny tale of a young, gay Filipino.

Toxic Decline

Researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have discovered a hazardous toxin in the endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Ciguatoxin is a toxin produced by coral reef algae, affecting sea life and fish consumed by humans.

Counting Degrees

The Hawaiian Islands are now listed by the Endangered Species Coalition as third on the list of the top 10

Recent Comments

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He sees new fences and ‘no trespassing’ signs blocking ancient trails to the mountains and the sea, mansions crowding once-empty beaches, locals made homeless by the unregulated vacation-rental trade. He sees keiki left home alone or raised by tã, tã, while parents do time in low-wage tourism jobs or jail. He sees the gates that separate affluent newcomers from the community. And he sees the ice use, rental car rip-offs and vandalism that represent, to the disempowered, subversive strikes against the system that brings these changes.

That’s the reality Hermosura encounters as he moves through the rural, isolated region where he was born and raised, and it bears little resemblance to the fantasy North Shore life portrayed in real estate flyers and tourism brochures. Even the extensively photographed and widely admired taro fields play into the charade, conveying the reassuring misimpression that here, at least, the Hawaiian culture still thrives.

The millers’ tale

In fact, the number of Hawaiians who derive their food or livelihood from these North Shore lo’i has been declining since even 1850, when the first Christian missionaries, Abner Wilcox and Edward Johnson, reported that disease had ravaged the district’s original 6,000 to 8,000 inhabitants to little more than 2,000–110 of whom were taro farmers. As the Hawaiian population declined, the rich, loamy taro fields of Hanalei and adjacent Wai’oli—once among the most extensive in Hawai’i, according to accounts from those early evangelicals—began to fall idle.

Chinese and Japanese immigrants, brought to the islands as contract workers for sugar plantations, began raising rice and a little bit of taro. When the rice industry collapsed in 1961, they switched nearly en masse to taro, one of the few lucrative crops available to small farmers. It was hard work, with planting, weeding and harvesting done by hand. The crop took 14 months to mature, but the plants were hardy and resilient. Farmers could pretty much count on harvesting every taro huli they planted, whereas weather, insect pests and hungry birds could wipe out a field of grain or vegetables.

In those halcyon pre-development-boom days, when farmers had access to ample, low-cost land and water, taro cultivation thrived once again. By the mid-1960s, some 14 million pounds of taro were being harvested each year from thousands of acres across the state. Honolulu Poi Company, now known as HPC LLC, bought much of it. The firm cooked the nutritious purple corms and milled them into poi, which was bagged and sold to city folk for as little as 13 cents a pound. In this way, a traditional Polynesian staple, a crop once raised almost solely by Hawaiian families for personal use, became a modern farm commodity, with kanaka maoli playing, at best, a small, supporting role.

Some 40 years later, that trend continues, although the industry is tougher, and almost cutthroat competitive, in the face of declining taro supplies and rising taro profits. There’s still money to be made in the flooded fields of Hanalei, where state archaeologists recorded one of the earliest human cultivation sites, dating back perhaps 1,300 years. But the big bucks don’t go to those who toil through blazing sun and pouring rain in mud infested with the latest taro-patch scourge: sharp-shelled apple snails that inflict deep cuts in bare flesh, exposing victims to leptospirosis, a potentially lethal strain of freshwater bacteria.

No, the real profit lies in the processed fruits of that field labor, in products like

endangered ecosystems. “Every native forest bird is at risk,” says Marjorie Ziegler, executive director of the Conservation Council for Hawaii.

RE:Play it straight

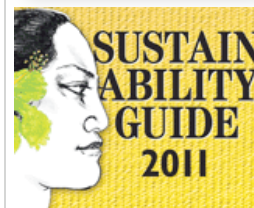
[June 22: “Call for Hawaiian Trustee”] My name is Rita Kawehi Kanui, and I would like to bring a white flag into this discussion that for many has gone off the path of brotherly love. It seems that “sickpuppy691” (whomever that is) has a personal vendetta against Eric, and I would like to bring some focus to this discussion.

Getting real

[June 22: “Goodbye, Hello”] These efforts [of the Hawaii Symphony] are remarkable, and commendable, but they do not address the root of the problem. The lack of a proper space for concerts is the real challenge faced by an orchestra in Honolulu.

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flour, chips, rolls and poi. Depending on the time of year, demand and availability, poi fetches upwards of \$5.99 per pound. By comparison, last year island farmers got an average 54 cents per pound of taro, according to state agricultural statistics, and even less—52.5 cents per pound—on Kaua'i, where the bulk of the crop is sold to HPC, which dictates the price. Maui taro farmers, by comparison, receive 55 cents per pound, while Big Island farmers have been averaging 60 cents for nearly a decade, primarily because they sell to several millers, which helps keep prices competitive. Combined, the islands grow about 5.1 million pounds of taro, a commodity valued at just under \$3 million annually. Millers buy the crop and turn it predominantly into poi, which generates revenues topping \$23 million each year. That's a \$20 million increase over the farm gate price, and none of it trickles back down to the farmers.

Of course, profits dip when production is down, as it is right now, due to the extensive New Year's Day flooding that kept North Shore taro plants under water too long, retarding their growth. These weather-related, seasonal production fluctuations are exacerbated by the steady overall decline in taro cultivation. Hawai'i lost 60 small taro farms between 1994 and 2004, bringing the total down to about 130. At the same time, the amount of land planted with taro plummeted from 550 to 370 acres. Farmers and agricultural experts blame the decline on skyrocketing land values and stagnant commodity prices that haven't kept pace with rising farming costs.

To keep their own profits high and steady, the major millers need a consistent taro supply. To attain that, they must cultivate their own crops or more tightly manage the local farmers who do it for them. HPC buys only from Kaua'i growers who can meet a production quota of five 80-pound bags per week. Another option is to import taro from other nations, with Tahiti reportedly identified as one likely source. Any one of these tactics would further increase the millers' dominion over Hawai'i's most culturally significant crop.

Millers already control the market, from the wholesale price paid farmers—who must sell to the mills or not at all—to the retail price charged consumers, who must buy from the mills, or not at all. Now millers are looking to dominate the production side as well. Companies like HPC, the state's largest buyer of independently produced taro, and Hanalei Poi Co.—which has expanded through Internet sales and an inter-island distribution network—already have negotiated master leases for taro land owned by Grove Farm Co. near Koloa, and the Gaylord and Carol Wilcox Family Trust in Hanalei.

A strategy that makes economic sense for profit-driven corporations is bound to take a human toll on Kaua'i, where small family farms from Waimea to Wainiha produce 75 percent of the state's wetland taro. Most of them are entirely at the mercy of HPC, whose broadening foray into production is viewed by some as cause for worry. Ironically, Hanalei Poi, which initially promoted itself as an alternative to HPC's near-monopoly and a friend to small, independent farmers, is following in the footsteps of its rival.

New landlord

To Ka'imi Herмосura, the maneuverings and manipulations within the taro industry are yet another manifestation of the larger socioeconomic trends reshaping the North Shore. It's a force he ruefully calls 'the squeeze,' a strategy that uses primarily economic forces—like budget-breaking property taxes, lawsuits, mortgage

defaults, quiet title actions, fines and fees—to drive locals out of their homes and off their farms.

He's been feeling the squeeze for at least the last 10 of his 22 years, although never quite so intensely as now. Hermosura and his family are facing eviction from their Hanalei taro farm, waiting for Public Safety Director Gary Saiki to execute the writ of possession that District Judge Frank Rothschild granted on May 27. Technically, it's his father's fight; Bito Hermosura signed the 1992 month-to-month lease that authorizes him to farm four acres of wetlands on a 39-acre parcel owned by Gaylord and Carol Wilcox, and located mauka of the shopping center the couple developed in downtown Hanalei.

The Hermosuras farmed their taro patch as a family, with Bito, his wife, Raelene, and their four sons—Hanalei, Kanaloa, Ka'imi and Kekoa—pitching in. The small parcel linked the clan to their culture; it provided kalo to accompany fish that Bito caught and space to raise a few pigs and cows for food and a small income that made a big difference in a household of modest means. The farm kept the close-knit family together, even after the two oldest boys left home. It was where they reunited as 'ohana at pau hana time to tend the lo'i and the animals before going their separate ways or heading home to Wainiha, some five miles away.

All that began to change when Wilcox asked Hanalei Poi, which is co-owned by his nephew, Hobey Beck, and Michael 'Bino' Fitzgerald, to take over the taro lot. Wilcox, contacted by e-mail, said he'd had continual tenant problems and didn't have the time or expertise to properly oversee the land. The new management took effect Jan. 1, 2004, but it wasn't until March 5 that Wilcox sent a letter advising Bito to seek a lease from his new landlord, Hanalei Poi. Wilcox said his letter 'was necessitated by eviction legalities,' because Hanalei Poi had already notified farmers of the change back in 2003. The Hermosuras never got a copy of that letter, however, reportedly because Hanalei Poi didn't know where to send it.

The family had heard rumors about the changeover, though, and both Hermosura and his mother had been trying for weeks to reach Beck and Fitzgerald to learn more. Hermosura said he thought the two men were avoiding him because they hadn't paid for taro he'd delivered months earlier, 'when they were begging for kalo and I was pulling everything I had, even young ones, because they didn't have any taro for their mill.' In late March, Fitzgerald called to say the check had been mailed. It arrived just ahead of a formal notice of eviction sent by attorney Mal Dohrman, Beck's stepfather.

The family was stunned. Unfamiliar with the legal system—neither Hermosura nor his father had ever set foot in a courtroom—and unable to afford an attorney, they intensified their efforts to meet with Beck or Fitzgerald and caught up on their back rent, thinking perhaps that was the cause for the action. On June 1, with the court hearing eight days away, Beck agreed to a meeting at the Hermosura farm.

During the session, also attended by John and Wilbert Haumea, brothers who farm the neighboring patch, Beck said he wouldn't lease to Bito because he was behind in rent. Beck, who didn't return calls seeking comment for this article, acknowledged, however, that nearly all the other tenants were in arrears and he had worked out repayment plans under new leases.

Hermosura says Beck was unaware their rent had been paid up until Raelene showed him the receipt. Beck then said it didn't matter because Bito was hard to get along with and the other farmers didn't want him there. The Haumeas disputed

that claim, saying all the tenants squabbled; they suggested Beck meet with the farmers as a group to iron out the problems. Hermosura said that he wanted to take over the lease from his father, as he was already doing most of the work.

Still Beck resisted, saying he was thinking of bringing in some Big Island farmers to work the land. When asked where they would live, given Kaua'i's rental shortage, Beck said he was working on a long-term master plan for the Wilcox acreage that would include farm dwellings and walking tours of the taro fields. Hermosura says that's when he realized Beck wanted to replace his maverick father with farmers who would be beholden to Hanalei Poi and unlikely to oppose development plans. The Hermosura farm is strategically located should a road be built to parcels that lack vehicular access.

Hermosura still pursued a lease, however, and the Haumeas backed him up, urging Beck to 'give the boy a chance' because he was a hard worker. Indeed, at that time, Hermosura, who does all the cultivation by hand, had more of his land planted than any other tenant, and still does today.

Beck finally relented and said he would consider leasing to Hermosura if he removed the animals, a derelict car and a tractor by July 1. Beck also agreed to meet with all the farmers on July 10 to discuss his master plan for the land. He further agreed to put a hold on court proceedings set for later that month. At Hermosura's request, the agreement was reiterated in a June 3 letter from Beck's attorney, with the court date pushed to July 28.

Hermosura, elated at the breakthrough, got to work. A crew member of the Hā'ea kule'a, he skipped a Northwestern Hawaiian Islands excursion to meet Beck's July 1 deadline. Despite heavy rains that made progress difficult, he completed the clean up on time and met with the other farmers, who supported his plan to assume the lease.

The July 1 deadline came and went, as did the July 10 meeting date with the farmers. But Beck hadn't postponed the June 9 court hearing, as promised. Thinking they weren't due in court until July, the Hermosuras didn't show up, and Hanalei Poi won a default judgment.

Kangaroo court

What followed was nearly a year of legal wranglings, with attorney Peter Morimoto agreeing to represent the family pro bono in its courtroom proceedings, the most recent of which was a trial held over two days, weeks apart, in the Koloa courthouse, on the opposite side of the island.

The proceedings left Morimoto with a bad taste in his mouth, and the feeling that his clients had been shafted. Before Morimoto even made his final statement, the judge—a close friend of Beck's father—announced he was ready to rule in favor of Hanalei Poi.

'I was well aware of that three weeks ago, or whenever this trial started,' Morimoto says. 'It was obvious then that the writing was on the wall, so to speak. My clients merely wanted a fair shot in a Western court of law and they wanted the rules to be applied fairly and equitably. I don't think that's happened, but that's the way it's gonna be and they fully understood they were facing an uphill battle. But they believe that they are entitled to farm that property as kanaka maoli and will continue to do so.'

Judge Rothschild, however, took aim at Hermosura, the sole witness called for the defense after the judge, during the first day of testimony, disregarded the rules of evidence and allowed Hanalei Poi to introduce documents and testimony without the proper foundations, essentially handing them the case. In his testimony, which Rothschild later ordered stricken from the record, Hermosura asserted he had inherent and genealogical rights to farm the land, and was also exercising his native rights related to consumption.

‘We have lots of folks coming to our courts and serving all kinds of rights and defenses intended to give them immunity from our laws,’ the judge said. ‘People say they’re not bound by the rules of the road that the rest of us follow because they belong to the Kingdom of Hawai’i. My response is, I don’t care if you’re from the Kingdom of Tonga or any other kingdom. When you come here, to this land, you’re required to follow the rules and the laws of the state of Hawai’i.’

As far as he could see, the co-owners of Hanalei Poi had ‘bent over backwards’ to help the farmers. They had tried to work with the defendants, setting forth conditions that the Hermosuras did not meet, until they were finally forced into legal action. ‘This was not something these gentlemen enjoyed doing, coming into court like this.’

Wilcox, who testified on behalf of Hanalei Poi, later commented by e-mail that ‘Given what I know and what I’ve heard....I have to support Hanalei Poi in this case. Landlords have to deal with evictions. They are unpleasant, no matter what the circumstances—particularly with long-term residents and an old paddling friend.’

Wilcox also said that Hanalei Poi had been ‘more than fair’ when before the trial it offered Hermosura a one-year lease, with the provision Bito stay away from the farm. ‘I’m sure there are other taro opportunities around, and I wish Ka’imi well in taro farming.’

Hermosura says the offer was an insult—taro is a 14-month crop and Beck’s earlier actions had eroded his trust in Hanalei Poi.

‘Do they think I’m stupid?’ says Hermosura. ‘That I’d do all the work and then they could kick me out in a year and keep all my taro? And then trying to turn me against my Dad like that, as if I could control him even if I wanted to.’

Rothschild’s decision and Wilcox’s endorsement of his agents may have legally resolved the matter, but it doesn’t feel settled to Hermosura. Too many things about the process don’t sit right with him, hardening his resolve to see it through to a different conclusion. He still feels the toll the lawsuit took on his family: the anxiety, worry and stress it provoked, the conflict it fanned, the fear and doubt it fostered. The farm that once kept them together had become an instrument for tearing them apart.

But as his family pulled away from the lo’i, Hermosura became closer to it. He does most of the planting, harvesting, mowing and weeding alone, relying on the black mud squishing beneath his feet to work its therapeutic magic, draining residual rage and bitterness from his body. The farm, always a retreat of sorts to Hermosura, has come to assume additional importance as his port in the storm, his refuge from the unrelenting changes disrupting the landscape, lifestyle and lives dearest to him.

He won’t be driven from the farm, certainly not by an action with such a base

motivation. ‘I know what it’s about,’ he says, his jaw tightening. ‘It’s about money.’ It’s never been his god, but he knows its power, so he plans to use whatever tools are available to him—boycotts, documentaries, word of mouth, picketing—to exert some downward pressure on Hanalei Poi sales. He doesn’t want to destroy the company, which employs some of his friends and neighbors, and he wishes no harm toward its owners. He just wants them to give him a reasonable lease so he doesn’t have to waste any more energy on this fight.

In the meantime, he says, ‘I’ll just live like I’m supposed to be living.’ Hermosura also intends to heed Rothschild’s final words, at least the ones that pertained to fairness, and how it ‘goes both ways.’ And the judge’s admonishment that those who come to a place must heed the existing rule of laws set forth by the government in power most certainly echoes loudly in his head.

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