

Walking in a Hawaiian Forest

by Kāwika Winter, Director, Limahuli Garden and Preserve

Many of us who are in the field of restoration ecology at the National Tropical Botanical Garden were inspired to do such work by the experiences of our childhood. I was fortunate enough to grow up playing in the forests of the Ko‘olau Mountains on O‘ahu where there were large areas that were still pristine. The onslaught of invasive species, habitat loss through development, and hurricanes have since degraded our native ecosystems to such a point that it is now nearly impossible for someone to walk in a forest of 100% native species. The opportunities for today’s youth to experience what some of us were so privileged to enjoy are fast disappearing.

The effect of this on our youth is evident. When school groups come through Limahuli Garden, we ask them how many native trees the whole class can collectively name. Sadly the answer is never more than two — koa (*Acacia koa*) and ‘ōhi‘a lehua (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) — if even that many. If the class is able to name any we then ask students to point them out. This question is often met with blank stares. It is especially distressing to see native Hawaiian children unable to name or identify native trees...it shows us that they have lost the intimate connection to the forest that their ancestors maintained for nearly two millennia in these islands.

What can we do today to address this issue for the youth of Hawai‘i? Our answer is a new approach to interpreting Hawaiian ecosystems in botanical gardens. Our answer is Dave’s Forest Walk.

While we have been doing ecological restoration in the preserve behind the garden for many years, the remote and rough terrain has precluded access by school groups and other visitors. Dave’s Forest

Walk is a new interpretive section in the garden — an ecological restoration project that engulfs a large section of the interpretive trail. Our goal is to provide the now extremely rare opportunity to take a leisurely stroll through a native forest, one that immerses our visitors in a web of biodiversity that is composed top-to-bottom of truly native Hawaiian species.

There are two people in particular who are responsible for the health and look of our forest walk, Mike DeMotta and A. “Bino” Castelo. Mike was once Limahuli’s Living Collections Manager and now serves as NTBG’s Assistant Director of Living Collections and Horticulture. As he often comments, “What makes this section different than any other in Hawai‘i is our attention to fine detail. We have made an extra effort to include the uncommon and easily forgotten components

▼ Dave’s Forest Walk, a new interpretive area in Limahuli Garden, provides visitors the opportunity to explore native plants in an environment that reflects the beauty, diversity, and complexity of a Hawaiian mesic forest. The trail abounds with rare ferns, epiphytes, and trees. *Photo by David H. Leopold. Used with permission.*



of native ecosystems like rare ferns and epiphytes.” Bino, who took Mike’s place at Limahuli, fondly points out that this section represents a way in which our garden can continue to build upon our



▲ Rare Kaula endemic fern, hoe a mau (*Elaphoglossum crassicaule*).
Photo by author.

▶ Facing page: Koki’o (*Kokia kauaiensis*), listed as Endangered.
Photo by Jon Letman.

relationships in the community, “Hālau hula (hula schools) from our community can come to gather the plants that they need for their ceremonies. I am proud to be a part of all this.”

We are well on the way to providing our visitors with the unique experience of enjoying a Hawaiian forest as one would have 200 years ago. Species outplanted in the section include those that are extinct in the wild, and others that are so rare they are either extinct on the island or down to a few individuals in the wild. Many of them are Federally listed as either Threatened or Endangered. This may be the only or one of the few places in the world that one can go

to see species this rare thriving in their natural habitat as they once did.

This section of the Limahuli Garden was dedicated as “Dave’s Forest Walk” in early 2008 to honor David Boynton (1945-2007), an environmental educator whose passion about Hawaiian forests inspired children and adults alike, including many among NTBG’s staff. This new section makes it easier for people to understand the desperate state of Hawaiian forests, our restoration projects aimed



at saving them, and the importance of maintaining biodiversity globally. The forest walk is now 18 months old. Although it is just now starting to feel like a true forest, there are still a few years ahead of us until it becomes the closed canopy system that it was designed to be. But maybe, just maybe, one day a restoration ecologist will be heard recalling how her professional inspiration came from a special moment in Limahuli Garden...E ola koa!¹

1 May you live as long as a koa tree.

This piece was just one of the articles featured in the print magazine
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