How The Westside Is Restoring The Coconut Tree As A Food Source In Hawaii

A group from the University of Hawaii West Oahu sees planting coconut trees as a way of improving food security and cultural ties in Hawaii.

By Ku'u Kauanoe

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Indrajit Gunasekara had never seen trimmed coconut palms until he moved to Hawaii in 2004. As he walked along the beaches in Waikiki, he didn't recognize them at first. "I have never seen that before in my life. It did not look like the natural tree," Gunasekara said.

Hailing from Matara, a village in southern Sri Lanka, Gunasekara learned to climb his first coconut tree when he was 4 years old and ate coconut with every meal. He was taught it is the tree of life because not only was it a food source for his village, but its cultivation is still a part of their everyday lifestyle.

Gunasekara was shocked to find out that coconut was no longer a staple in Hawaii's diet. His village was surrounded by forests and his community would often go to them

for food and medicine. It's a relationship with the land that he was hoping to find when he moved to Oahu.

"To this day, it's hard for me to get over. Why don't people eat the foods that grow here?" Gunasekara says.

As founders of the NiU Now! movement, Indrajit Gunasekara and Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer are reinvigorating coconut, or niu, growing on the Westside.

With a grant from the University of Hawaii's Office of Sustainability, the Uluniu Project launched in 2017 with the planting of 10 niu — coconut — palms and 10 ulu — also known as breadfruit — trees in the Student Organic Gardens at UH West Oahu. Now, they have more than 400 seedlings in their nursery that they plan on distributing to community members as a way for them to grow their own food. Their 11,000square-foot lot also hosts other native shrubs and crops with the hope of creating a harmonious all-native mala, or garden.

Gunasekara, who is a financial aid advisor at UH West Oahu, is teaming with faculty member Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer to bring back coconut, or niu, and other native fruit-bearing trees to Oahu – particularly to the Westside. They are calling their efforts the NiU Now! movement.

"This planting is a good way for people to connect to their food and understand the place that it comes from," Gudasekara says.

Because the palms take about five to seven years to produce coconuts, the NiU Now! team plans to host their second Arbor Day coconut giveaway in 2022. People in the movement see food security as the biggest challenge for their communities and hope

that by giving people the plants and knowledge they need to grow their own food, it will revitalize cultural niu practices and provide a sustainable food source for local families.

A Transformative Experience

The first time Aluli-Meyer tried fresh coconut milk, she cried. Gunasekara grated the niu meat and squeezed it into a glass for her, with a little bit of paakai, or salt, to bring out the flavor. After that moment, she realized how little she knew about coconut and its many uses.

“We’ve lost the taste for our own staples,” Aluli-Meyer says.

As the konohiki, or facilitator, of Kulana o Kapolei — A Hawaiian place of learning at the University of Hawaii at West Oahu — Dr. Aluli-Meyer works in and out of the classroom, teaching her students how to connect to Hawaiian culture by working with the land. She believes that the coconut tree has become an “ornamental liability,” no longer a main food source but a decorative symbol of tourism in Hawaii. Aluli-Meyer says that people have become more afraid of a coconut falling on them or damaging their property.

The relationship people in Hawaii have to their staple foods is a key reason why she wanted to plant niu at the university.

Besides nourishment, coconut tree trunks were used historically to make canoes and cordage from the husks. Using the tree for multiple purposes lends to Aluli-Meyer’s idea of cultural agroforestry, or using traditional knowledge to grow a sustainable, native forest.

“We don’t harvest kale or salad every six weeks. We harvest lau (leaf), uala (sweet potato), ulu, and niu because we are in the tropics and we are island people,” Aluli-Meyer says.

A Rich History

Up until the 1800s, coconut groves flourished along the Waianae Coast of Oahu. One Hawaiian story tells of the Tahitian chief Pokaʻi, who is said to have brought the first coconut trees to Hawaii and planted them in Waianae. There, he grew his most famous grove, Ka Ulu Niu o Pokaʻi. The present-day beach park, Pokai Bay, is named after him. West Oahu was prolific for its diverse agroforestry pre-European contact. Fed by many perennial rivers, the valleys were filled with kalo, or taro, patches.

Dr. Noa Kekuewa Lincoln, a professor at UH Manoa, says there are a lot of reasons why native crops like niu have diminished in the area. Specifically for the Westside, it was the diversion of water from the area to sugar cane plantations in the late 1800s.

“Changing the hydrology of the Westside caused a big loss of self-sustaining ecosystems like these novel coconut groves,” Lincoln says.

Jesse Mikasobe-Kealiinohomoku is a student at UH West Oahu and founded the Aloha Aina Student Services Club as a way for people to learn aina work.

Like Aluli-Meyer, he is appalled at the way people view coconuts today.

“Coconut and these other crops were a major part of the ecosystem for a third of the world and how quickly it’s gone from being a critical food source to landscape decoration amazes me,” Lincoln says.

Jesse Mikasobe-Kealiinohomoku has seen changes in the trees on the Westside throughout his lifetime. Born and raised in Waianae, he took an interest in farming and food sustainability after interning at MA’O Organic Farms and Malama Learning Center. As a Sustainable Community Food System major at UH West Oahu, he attributes the shortage to genetic erosion. When coconut trees are trimmed down or completely removed from their natural habitat, the diversity of species and fruit production diminish. “Plants cannot build resiliency to pests, weathering, or climate change if we are not being good stewards,” Mikasobe-Kealiinohomoku says.

Vilsoni Heneriko 'I grew up in Fiji, where niu culture is big.'
Niu Nursery Seed nuts planted at UHWO
Shyla Oshiro 'Doing aina work means I’m living in the past, present, and future'

He’s concerned about how Hawaii struggles with food insecurity and believes that food sustainability can be achieved through these kinds of native plants. He was inspired by Gunasekara and Aluli-Meyer’s work with niu and started working with them in the nursery.

He also founded the Aloha Aina Student Services Club at UH West Oahu to give people an opportunity to work with their hands and get a better understanding of plants. The trio have been to a few Westside farms and residences to help gardeners with their old niu palms. The biggest concern they've seen is pests, but it has been encouraging for them to meet other community members interested in revitalizing niu.

"It gives me a great sense of pride to be able to plant and feed my community," Mikasobe-Kealiinohomoku says.

Bringing Back The Coconut

Since 2019, Mikasobe-Kealiinohomoku's club has been working with Gunasekara and Aluli-Meyer to cultivate the school's garden and working with other conservation programs and farms to bring fruit-bearing niu trees back to the Westside.

Partnering with Malama Learning Center, they have two niu nurseries in Kapolei. One of them, at Kapolei High School, teaches students how to grow the trees. The second at Palehua, a home conservation site, has sprouted 242 seedlings of over 20 varieties.

NiU Now! is also working with MA'O Organic Farms. Before meeting Gunasekara and Aluli-Meyer, MA'O only had a few coconut trees on their grounds but now have a small plot of 30 coconut trees with aspirations to build a niu nursery on newly acquired acreage.

On a recent workday, nearly 30 volunteers came to University of Hawaii at West Oahu to tend to the niu nursery and plant surrounding native shrubs and crops.

MA’O Farm Manager Kaui Sana was inspired by Gunasekara when he husked a coconut for her back in 2019. She wondered why she didn’t have a stronger relationship with niu and seeing his passion sparked her own.

“When we disconnect from our food, we disconnect from our culture in general,” Kaui Sana says.

With the help of their Communications Coordinator, Chelsie Onaga, they’ve hosted husking and weaving workshops and, during the pandemic, a NiU Now! webinar series to bring together fellow “niunates”– or beginner coconut stewards — across the Pacific. The intersection of niu knowledge across cultures has brought up connections that Sana says is rooted in the navigation traditions of Polynesia.

“We all have our own spaces whether we’re in Hawaii or Samoa or Sri Lanka, but the coconut continues to travel,” Sana says, “So we’re not just relearning these practices, but we’re *remembering* who we are.”

Visoni Hereniko weaving a papa’i lau niu – a shelter of coconut leaves for our young ‘ulu plants.