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Rare Find in Kohala

July 7, 2011 - 9:06pm

Volunteers seek to aid epiphyte plant presumed extinct

BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK | WEST HAWAII TODAY

A voluntary coalition of private landowners and state land managers hopes to preserve and propagate a rare Hawaiian plant species presumed extinct until it was discovered last summer in a North Kohala upland forest.

Kohala Watershed Partnership received in June a \$7,550 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery Branch for protection and restoration of oha wai, or Clermontia peleana singuliflora.

The endangered shrub or tree is an epiphyte, meaning it grows on another plant, but is not parasitic. Its name commemorates Pele, the volcano goddess of Hawaiian mythology, said Melora Purell, Kohala Watershed Partnership coordinator.

The coalition seeks to reduce threats to the plant and better understand its biology, as well as establish new colonies. Its goal is to propagate and plant at least 200 seedlings in a 10-acre fenced, ungulate-free area, which will also be treated with herbicide to kill competing grasses, Purell said.

The location is being kept secret to protect the delicate plants from unwanted collecting or poaching. The land is owned by Parker Ranch Foundation Trust, she added.

One of the world's rarest plants, oha wai has survived the threat of feral cattle and pigs by living high up in old, moss-covered ohia trees, especially those with associated hapuu ferns. It was Jon Giffin, Hawaii Island field representative for The Nature Conservancy, who discovered the plant while surveying a rare tree snail population in the area, Purell said.

Photographs of the plant were sent to Thomas Lammers, a recognized Clermontia authority at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, who identified it as oha wai.

Historically, oha wai was found on the windward slopes of Mauna Kea and the last specimens were collected in 1909. The Fish and Wildlife Service had presumed it was extinct in 1994.

An estimated 30 oha wai adults and seedlings have now been located and mapped; most were found along the forest edges and openings. The plants were rooted 5 feet or more above the ground, Purell said.

She suspects oha wai was always present in North Kohala, but overlooked, mostly because of its "weird" location and camouflaged characteristics. The plants have greenish white flowers and leaves that are dark green on the upper surface with a reddish midrib. The undersides are a dull green.

"We're not quite sure if this plant prefers to live in the trees or grew there out of survival," she said. "This plant had not been seen for a century and to be rediscovered is amazing. Its survival shows the power of endangered plants, which are often thought as weaker. These survivors carry genes that have helped make them unique and survive stresses."

Threats include habitat damage by wild cattle and pigs, competition from invasive weeds, fruit and seed



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 BY JOHN BURNETT | STEPHENS MEDIA

predation by rodents, seedling mortality from slugs and pheasants, reduced reproductive vigor because of small population, and damage from natural disasters, Purell said.

The Nature Conservancy collected ripe fruit from several oha wai last year. Seeds were extracted and provided to University of Hawaii's Volcano Rare Plant Facility for propagation. Seedlings have germinated in pots, further supporting that the plants may grow well in the ground, Purell said.

Kohala Watershed Partnership crews and volunteers will likely begin planting oha wai in the ground and tree notches in December. The coalition has planted Clermontia in the area and the survival rate of the outplantings is more than 80 percent, Purell said.

"We're confident that the plants will survive, but to measure success, they have to thrive," she said.

In the fall, Kohala Watershed Partnership crews are expected to begin constructing an approximately 500-foot-long fence around the plants, Purell said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service grant is covering the cost of the fencing and planting. Parker Ranch is also providing ongoing support for the project, Purell said.

Call 333-0976 or visit hawp.org or more information about this plant and effort.

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Comments

[Permalink](#) Submitted by [HouseSit](#) on July 8, 2011 - 8:23pm

Whoops. Heh, obviously some crossed wires here. Ummm, I guess I should comment on the epiphyte.... Uh... Yes.

I am glad that this plant is finally getting the attention it deserves!

That is all I have to say on this subject at this time.

This press conference is over.

[Permalink](#) Submitted by [stevez](#) on July 8, 2011 - 4:26pm

Correction: Are *you* reading...

[Permalink](#) Submitted by [stevez](#) on July 8, 2011 - 4:18pm

Ummm, HouseSit... Are reading the same article I am? This is about an endangered plant, not a driver...

[Permalink](#) Submitted by [HouseSit](#) on July 8, 2011 - 9:19am

Boo!!! Whose nephew is this dude? Proven as an irresponsible driver... Of course the county lets him drive their vehicles. They obviously felt the benefit outweighed the risk. So now let the county deal with the fall-out. This should lead to a change in policies and the firing of those responsible. Obviously it

Education center on wheels... (298)
BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK WEST HAWAII TODAY

Jim Rizzuto's Big-Fish... (283)
Big-Fish List

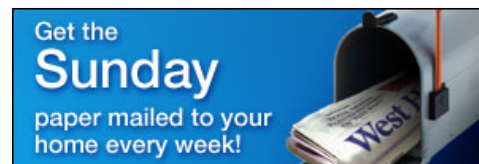
About Town 11-14 (258)
Lady Gaga concert canceled

Ashida to run for prosecutor (249)
BY NANCY COOK LAUER WEST HAWAII TODAY

Culture In Kohala (249)
Taiko drumming along with Hawaiian music and hula, were among the entertainme

in brief (246)
More road work on tap this week

Letters 11-14 (233)
Strawberry guava Wrong approach to biocontrol exercised



Polls
Will the \$56 million bond approved Wednesday by the County Council create jobs as the administration claims?



should also result in this guy getting his med bills paid.

This is the county's responsibility.

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- Possibly. At the very least, the projects will keep some local businesses working.
- Yes. Spending money in our community means local workers stay on the job, and unemployed people get hired.
- Absolutely not. The money will go to contractors, who aren't out of work anyway, and won't put anyone back to work.



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