

'Onipa'a Group Restores Taro Over Past Two Decades

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Volunteers in Waipi'o Valley constructed an 'auwai, or irrigation ditch, alongside existing taro patches to better control water levels.

This past November nearly 100 volunteers, most of them youths, lent a hand to two taro farms in Waipi'o Valley on the Big Island to restore traditional taro patches. The work consisted of a single intense day of re-engineering 'auwai and lo'i with picks, shovels, and many hands... the concept of laulima put into action. The group, called 'Onipa'a Na Hui Kalo (ONHK), has been restoring lo'i around the state for the last 20 years, supported by Lilikuokalani Trust. A site in Waialua on O'ahu hosted one of the first projects in 1996, and was followed by at least one project per year resulting in restored lo'i on every island except Kāho'olawe.

Most of the work is done by hand, both by necessity and by choice. As in Waipi'o, the taro lands that are restored are often difficult to access and navigate with heavy machinery. The terrain renders these lands undesirable by conventional agricultural standards, and makes for hard work constructing terraces and ditches.



Stream crossings and other difficult terrain make it challenging to bring in heavy machinery to some taro growing areas.

Apart from a few chainsaws, the point is also to do things the old fashioned way, to see how much can be accomplished with concerted human effort and a low level of inputs. This takes creativity and no small degree of madness. Tree trunks have been used as levers to move giant boulders, for example, and fires lit to bend plastic pipes around curving riverbanks. Seeing a group of people transform a tangle of hau bushes to taro patches, or watching water flow down a ditch that one helped to design and dig is moving and empowering.

Farmers face many challenges beyond the initial effort of opening land. While not all restored lo'i have continued production, ONHK's success lies in its ability to perpetuate taro cultivation when and where interest and opportunity arise, thereby preserving the knowledge and practice in a decentralized, low-cost way until a time when conditions change.

I have had the privilege of participating in ONHK workdays since I was a child, and they continue to inspire me and many others by strengthening our ties to each other, to healthy and productive agroecosystems, and to a living Hawaiian culture. Many thanks to Liliuokalani Trust and Onipa'a Na Hui Kalo for supporting this work.



Volunteers carry long sections of pipe to bring water down from a spring.