



Koa Stewardship —Kaua‘i

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When I was asked to look into what kind of koa was being managed on Kaua‘i, I must admit that initially I just drew a blank. There are a number of reasons why there have not been significant plantings of koa in the recent past. As I started to think about it, I thought that the most important thing that I could perhaps mention were the reasons why I and other people have chosen in fact not to plant koa. And, perhaps, we can deal with those problems or those opportunities and increase the potential for planting this fabulous tree.

There were significant plantings of koa in the Koke‘e area of Kaua‘i in the 1930s. I’m not even certain when all these plantings occurred, but I know much of the it occurred in the ‘30s. And much of it was from Hawai‘i Island seedstock. Some of those trees have grown into very nice form, especially some of the trees that are at the forestry cabin, up in Koke‘e; most have not. Most have become rather straggly or have lesser-quality form. There seems to be a similar amount of curliness to material that comes down every once in a while.

I had to ask myself, Why is it that I am not deciding to plant koa? And why is it that so few people on Kaua‘i have planted koa in the recent past? We could only find maybe a couple of people who have planted a hundred trees here or there. And I had to go back and look from my own standpoint and say, These are the reasons I made this decision. I can’t say that these were the reasons that someone else in my position that is looking at a commercial activity would make these decisions, but these are the reasons that I made the decision.

First of all, most of the lands on Kaua‘i that are available to someone like myself, who wants to start a “forest industry” that is a commercial forest industry on the island, planting and harvesting trees and hopefully taking that into secondary and tertiary products. Most of that land is between about 400 and 1200 feet in elevation. For the most part, koa doesn’t grow well in those elevations and as such, it’s precluded right off the bat. But after thinking a great deal about that, here obviously is an opportunity. The lack of availability of seed sources for low elevation that have been proven to produce a quality tree is an impediment. There is really no

knowledge of the chance of having a successful product at the end of your growth period, either due to the quality of the logs, the quality of the wood itself or even due to the recent die-back problems which are even to some extent not fully understood.

So, therefore, we lack available land. We have a lack of available seed sources, and we have one other issue which at least was partially was in my mind when I looked at what I was going to grow, and that was the fear of not being able to cut it down once I’ve grown it. While that has certainly been lessened by the passage of the Right to Harvest Bill here in Hawai‘i, it still is an issue that comes right the forefront, because anytime you start dealing with native species that support endangered species you begin to think about, “Gee. What happens if I get an endangered bird that takes up residence in my koa forest?” When I came in today, I must admit the fact that I was going to mention that was heightened a little bit by the flyer out there that said: “Stop Cutting Down the Koa Forests”. I’m not, by any means, intimating that we should cut down all the koa forests.

But that is an issue, and it’s an issue that needs to be addressed. We need to work from a commercial and from an environmental standpoint to understand what are the limitations that we’re going to work under here and how can we work with each other. If people are scared to plant, that is obviously not going to help expand the koa forests on the islands of Hawai‘i.

To summarize, the factors that led me away from planting koa were the lack of available seed sources (and therefore the ability to guarantee that you could get a good quality crop) and the lack of available land (especially public land). I have attempted to look at leases on public land and have been told no, there just are no leases available. The only lands where you could begin to expand koa forests on Kaua‘i are public lands, for the most part which are high enough in rainfall to achieve that kind of success. The final factor is the fears about regulatory interventions, which are in some cases real and in some cases perceived, but nonetheless, whether they’re either, they have an impact on people making decisions.