

Hana coconut gene bank safeguards cultural gems

Vicky Heldreich Durand is a Punahou School graduate whose life has been shaped by a deep connection to Hawaii’s land, ocean and culture. A former champion surfer, her creative path led



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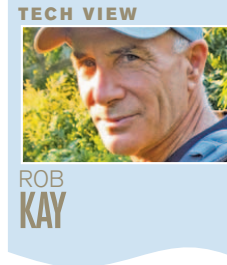
Durand her to found a sports-wear and textile company. She is also the author of “Wave Woman,” an intimate biography and love letter to her mother, Betty Pembroke Heldreich Winstedt — a pioneering woman who trained for the 1936 Olympics, embraced bold reinvention and took up surfing at 41 to become a champion in her own right. Durand’s eclectic journey brought her to her current chapter: co-founding Koali

Niu, Maui’s first living coconut gene bank, where she is helping save the niu as a living symbol of Hawaiian heritage and island resilience. Here are some of her thoughts.

Question: What was the personal turning point that led you to transform the Koali land into a coconut gene bank?

Answer: After my husband, Bob Liljestrand, passed away in 2021, I reached a crossroads. I knew my life had to change, and that the land at Koali needed a new purpose — one rooted in responsibility and the perpetuation of a legacy.

Around that time, I reconnected with an old friend, Indrajit Gunasekara, who had been working on a grassroots coconut revitalization effort known as Niu Now. Through Indrajit, I began to understand the profound cultural, ecological,



nutritional and genetic importance of the niu — the coconut palm — and the urgency of its preservation. I realized that returning to Hana was not about reclaiming land, but about giving back: to Hawaiian people, to ancestral knowledge systems and to the living future of the land itself. From that realization, Koali Niu was born in 2023 — the first living coconut gene bank of its kind on Maui.

Q: For readers who may think of coconut palms as just part of the scenery, why should they care whether rare Hawaiian niu varieties survive?

A: Over the last hundred

years, the niu has gone from being a critical food source and cherished part of Hawaiian culture to a mere landscape decoration. It was once closely associated with royal celebrations and used for food, medicine, rope, building materials and baskets — carrying deep cultural and spiritual significance.

Recently, Hawaiian coconut trees have also become victims of the coconut rhinoceros beetle, which has killed hundreds of trees on Oahu. Since 2023, Maui has faced this threat as well, making the need to safeguard the coconut gene pool urgent. Koali Niu exists to take a leading role in providing that service.

Q: You can’t freeze coconut like other seeds. What does it take to run a living gene bank?

A: To save a niu, it must grow and be kept alive. At Koali, every palm is a carefully documented lineage. We utilize the polymotu (many islands) method — planting varieties in “triads”

to prevent cross-pollination and ensure genetic integrity remains pure. Each lineage is then studied, identified, catalogued, and that information is shared.

Q: The coconut rhinoceros beetle has been called a “prehistoric” threat. What does Koali Niu do to fight it on the ground?

A: Fortunately, the beetle has not yet reached Hana. Our seedlings were planted two years ago and are still young and maturing — it will be another three years before the trees produce coconuts. In the meantime, we keep a watchful eye and are preparing solutions for when the threat arrives.

Q: Your website mentions searching for what you call “lost niu” — rare ancient varieties found in forgotten groves. What does that search look like?

A: We visit locations where coconuts are growing and carefully look for distinctive varieties. Once a nut is identified, it is brought back to the gene bank,

where it is grown following safeguarding protocols introduced by Niu Now co-founder Indrajit Gunasekara. When it reaches a certain size, the nut is planted in a triad formation.

Q: The Koali land has a complicated history — including its unjust removal from Hawaiian families. How does that history shape the way you approach your work?

A: The land has been returned to a Hawaiian family from Hana — the Pu ‘Ohana, lineage descendants of Koali. The Koali Niu project will be back in local Hawaiian possession, cared for and farmed as their ancestry once was tied to this aina. There will also be an education and cultural center to serve youth, community members and interested individuals beyond Hana.

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