

Kauai Fresh

From food bank to a catalyst of food security

BY JUDITH F. LENTHALL

The northernmost island in the Hawaiian archipelago, Kauai is just 20 minutes by air from Oahu, home to the state's overbuilt capital city, Honolulu. Like Bali is to Jakarta, Kauai seems to many people like a "separate kingdom" from Oahu: a paradise of incredible scenic beauty, classic tropical beaches, and spectacular canyons and cliffs.

Unfortunately, you just can't eat scenery.

Our exorbitant cost of living combined with low wages means that there is a very large low-income working population on Kauai as well as a substantial number of wealthy and upscale second-home owners. The resident population is about 60,000, plus 5,000 tourists on any given day. Its labour force numbers about 30,000.

Prior to the mid 1990s, agriculture was the primary industry of Kauai, or more accurately, mono-crop sugarcane plantations. With the closure of four out of five plantations in the past ten years, the economy has come to rely even more

heavily on tourism, military, and government.

No overview of Kauai economics would be complete, however, without mentioning the devastation wrought by Hurricane Iniki in September 1992. One of the most intense hurricanes to ever strike an American shore, Iniki left one-third of the population homeless, and severely damaged the houses of another third. Over 1,000 power and telephone lines were felled. Tourism, the island's major source of employment and revenue, ceased immediately. Several years after Iniki, unemployment was well into the 20% range – the highest of any county in the U.S.A.

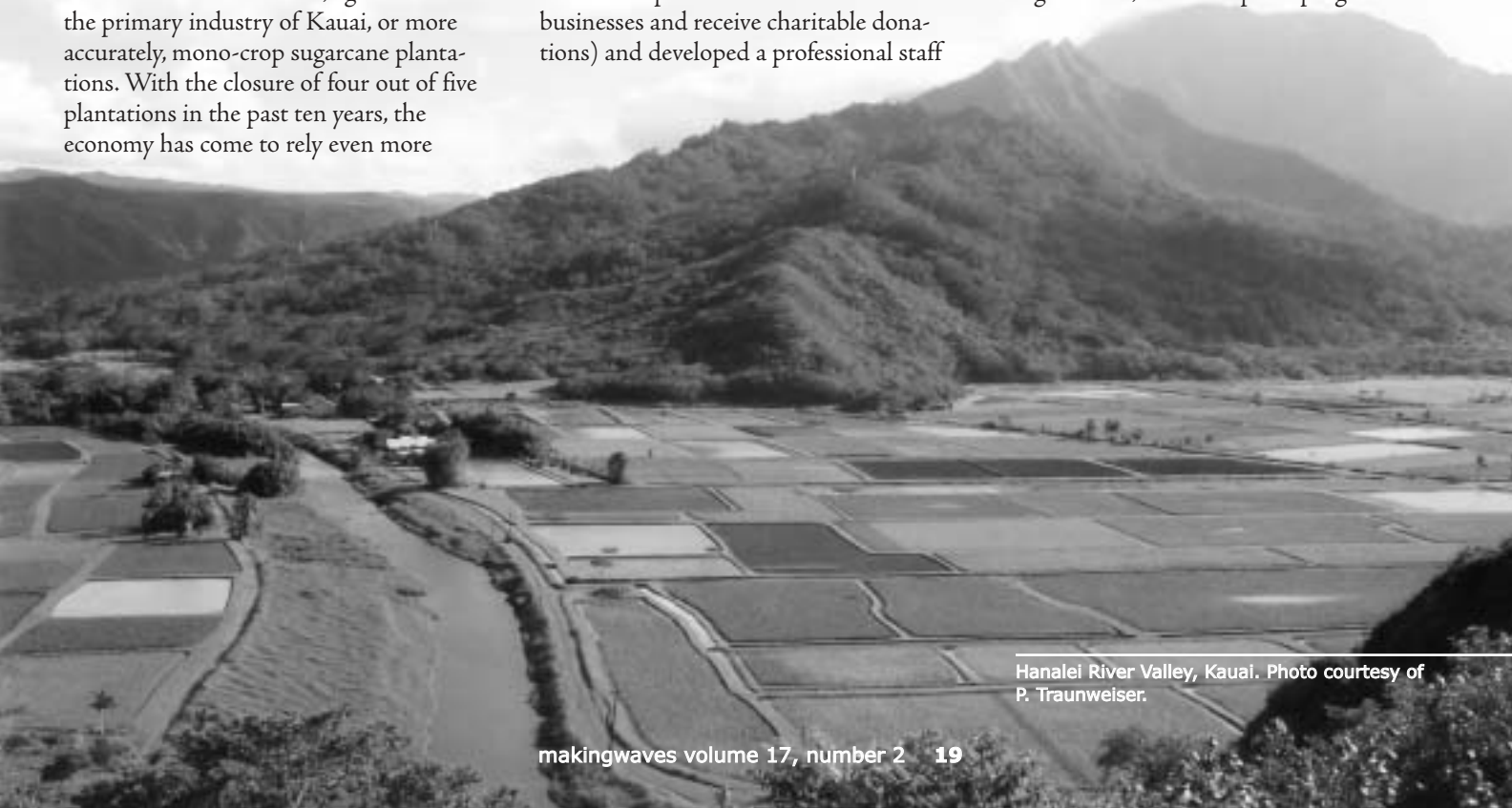
In the hurricane's chaotic aftermath, local people formed the Kauai Food Bank. Volunteers distributed over five million pounds of emergency food to victims. By 1994, the Food Bank was assisting close to 20% of the island's population. It became a 501 (c)(3) corporation (i.e., a nonprofit, tax-free corporation that can both run businesses and receive charitable donations) and developed a professional staff

that today still solicits nearly 100,000 pounds of food monthly to serve about 10% of the population, of whom half are children, and one quarter are elderly.

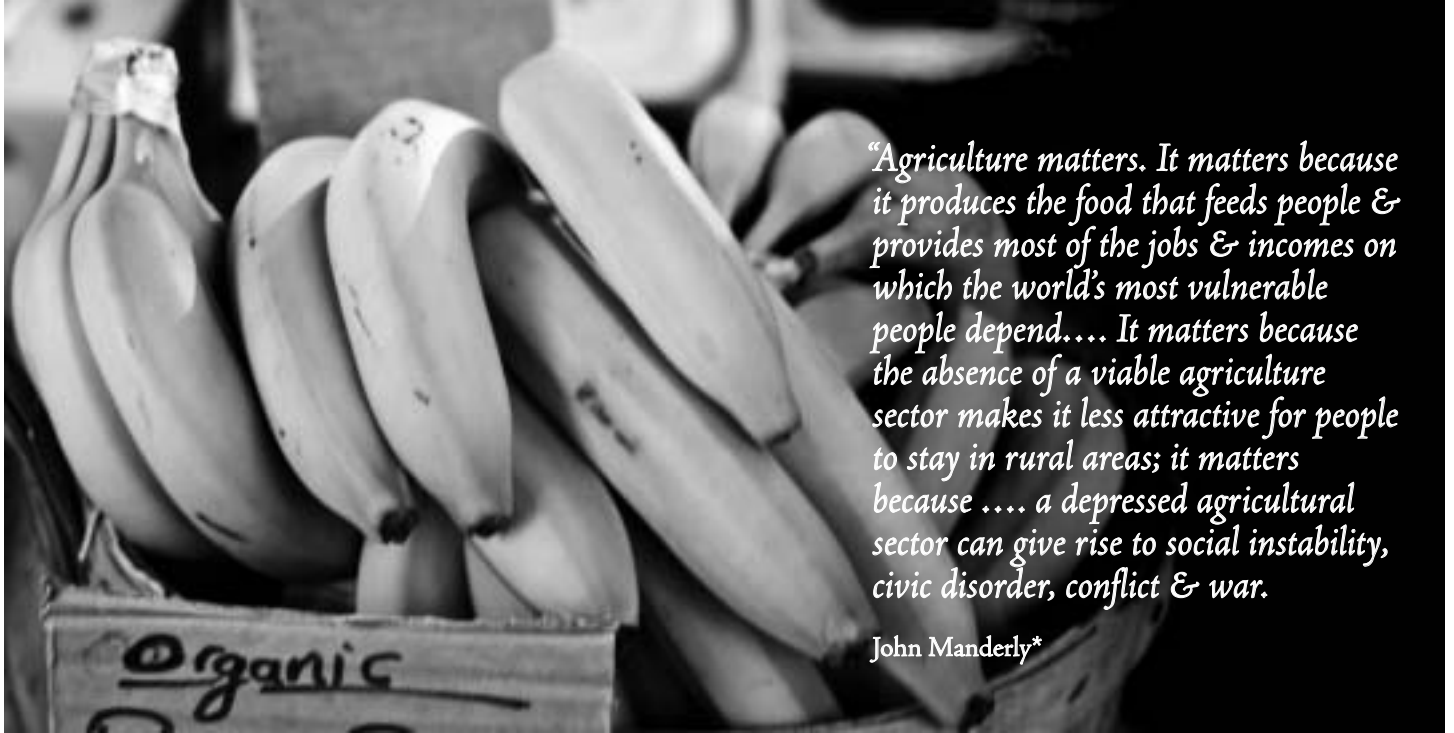
But Kauai Food Bank's reputation has come to be built not so much on *feeding the hungry*, as crucial as that is, as on *addressing the root causes of hunger* through original and unique programming. In a blink, we learned from that hurricane that our island maintained only a 3-day supply of food in the grocery stores. We imported about 90% of all our food. Never again could anyone be so naïve or complaisant about local food security. After the hurricane the time was right to develop training in diversified agriculture for laid-off sugar workers and for people whose livelihood had just been literally "blown away."

Kauai Fresh

Originally with funding from private foundations and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we developed a program that



Hanalei River Valley, Kauai. Photo courtesy of P. Traunweiser.



“Agriculture matters. It matters because it produces the food that feeds people & provides most of the jobs & incomes on which the world’s most vulnerable people depend.... It matters because the absence of a viable agriculture sector makes it less attractive for people to stay in rural areas; it matters because a depressed agricultural sector can give rise to social instability, civic disorder, conflict & war.

John Manderly*

taught recipients of emergency food to grow their own food at a Food Bank farm and then sell their Grade A produce back to the Food Bank. As hotels gradually began to reopen, their chefs wanted to provide local dishes to their guests. The Food Bank began to provide produce to the Hotel Marriott under the label “Kauai Fresh.” With help from the State Economic Development Agency, we created a food brokerage business to market Kauai Fresh products locally. We also developed a community-supported agriculture program to supply locally-grown fruits and vegetables to impoverished seniors.

Kauai Fresh enables the smallest backyard grower to get a foothold in the local produce market and provides him or her with an income stream that through the multiplier effect contributes to the local economy in numerous ways. From 2002-2005, the program put a total of almost US\$2 million into the pockets of 50 local growers and provided millions of pounds of produce for the community. Estimates are that less than 80% of Kauai’s produce is now imported, and our plans are to reduce that to 50% in the near future.

Ending hunger through economic development and ensuring that the island could survive catastrophes are not the only goals of Kauai Fresh. It also acts as a clearinghouse for food donations from

stores, hotels, distributors, and growers. In 2005, nearly one million pounds of this excess food was weighed, salvaged, sorted, and stored prior to distribution to more than 60 nonprofit or charitable organizations.

Finally, Kauai Fresh is also a health promotion strategy. Like many indigenous peoples, Native Hawaiians have proven to be very susceptible to diabetes. We are working to control or eliminate it and other diet-related diseases and ailments through nutrition education and the provision of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Keys to Success

Partners in Kauai Fresh have included the Native Hawaiian health community, the state and federal governments, private foundations, other nonprofit organizations, schools, and the private sector of individual growers, hoteliers, restaurants, grocers, and markets. This inter-sector alliance was created out of crisis, but it has been maintained through the careful nature of three key factors.

Economic Sustainability

If the program doesn’t pencil, it’s not going to last for anyone concerned, and the fact is, it *must* pencil for *all* concerned: the grower, the Food Bank, the retailer, and for the consumer.

To date, two business plans for Kauai Fresh have been developed to guide its price structure and to address competition, industry, and marketing issues. Food security projects that aspire to economic self-sustainability need to employ sound business planning techniques and approach market development both systematically and realistically. They must find their own legs and not remain dependent on government, foundations, or donations.

Social or Institutional Sustainability

A productive partnership is one in which all members of the team benefit in ways that are important to them. A “win-win” proposition must apply to all the players. Conversely, you have to be aware of what is driving all the different partners and realize that these needs must be met.

In the case of Kauai Fresh, the Hotel Marriott needed a reliable source of local produce that satisfied their expectations for both quality and price. Government needed to show that its training program grants supplied plenty of “bang per buck” in terms of specific deliverables pursuant to their goals – reduced unemployment, for example. Foundations needed assurance that their funds had been spent appropriately, and that the outcomes were achieved pursuant to the approved grant proposals. Growers needed a steady outlet for their product at a price that met their

requirements. Successful programs also stay flexible out of the realization that these needs can and probably will change.

Leadership is key in the development of strategic relationships as well as in the program's implementation. Visionary leadership that can inspire and motivate the various players will offers huge benefits to any food security program. But don't forget the other guises in which leadership comes.

The best community food projects are those undertaken by organizations with a *history of effective community involvement*. The organization that actively and continuously partners with the community builds the requisite trust for social change proposals, and fosters a mutually respectful working relationship. Without that record of effective community involvement, an organization will just find itself preaching – but not “to the choir”!

Finally, the organization must have a mission *consistent with the objectives of the project*. To do otherwise just doesn't make sense. You end up expecting to “make a silk purse out of a cow's ear” (i.e., in territory alien to your experience and skill) or “the tail wagging the dog” (i.e., mission-drift). Both spell trouble.

Cultural appropriateness

Many are familiar with the spectacular physical aspects of Kauai. Rather less well known are the historical and cultural attributes of the island. With an area of

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about 1425 square kilometers (about half the size of the island of Montréal), Kauai is small, rural, and isolated. Its people are renowned for their spirit of *aloha*, generosity, and even independence. (Kauai was the only island never conquered by King Kamehameha.) Kauaians have little desire to see Waikiki transplanted to their shorelines and they pride themselves on maintaining a lifestyle dedicated to family and *ohana*, which literally means “extended family,” but in practice means “all of us here together to help one another.”

It is the combination of these cultural attributes that fertilized the soils that received the seeds of Kauai Fresh: small scale development and rural (i.e., agricultural) preservation; the recognition that Hawaiiiana/Aloha is not only the host culture but the measure of a vibrant, healthy community; and the historical practice of “making do” in our isolation.

Kauai Fresh is based on the systematic integration of environmental, social, and economic sustainability in the food system. At the same time, a growing agri-

business movement has recently introduced genetically modified corn to the island's Westside. One sugar plantation has recently been reconfigured to become the State's largest coffee grower.

So the “Food Wars,” to use Heasman and Lang's terminology, are in full swing on Kauai. The Productionist, Life Science, and Ecological paradigms are all evident in the periodic debates carried on by interested parties in the local newspaper. The discourse is often passionate and even divisive.

That people feel so strongly about their food systems is, of course, healthy. What remains to be seen is the permanent power of each paradigm or model to affect public policy initiatives on Kauai, and to ensure that our food systems are safe, healthy, affordable, and sustainable. 

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* *Food for All: The Need for Agriculture* (Fernwood, 2002), p. 160.
(left) Photo courtesy of Laura Berman.

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