

H O N O L U L U

Weekly

Cover Story

Kohala nui

Education, environment and empowerment on the Big Island.

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Image: photos courtesy of the Kohala Center

In 1999, Five Mountains Hawai‘i, a community health non-profit group on Hawai‘i Island, facilitated an ambitious community education and planning process. Faced with a rising tide of health and social problems, residents were asked “What would make us a happier and healthier community?” The community responded with three top priorities: increase educational attainment for youth and adults, increase the ability of local people to qualify for available jobs and diversify the economy.

At first these recommendations read like the goals of a thousand plans that have gone before, but what breathed life into these initiatives was Pele herself. The concept of Hawai‘i Island as a living classroom was designed from the beginning, and the drive for more educational opportunities and a diversified economy was based upon the assertion that the Big Island itself was a valuable intellectual asset, that the environmental, health and social challenges that were emerging were an opportunity for research into solutions for Hawai‘i Island and the world.



A model ecosystem

The Kohala Center came into being in 2001 as an independent academic institution charged with integrating Hawaiian spiritual, cultural and scientific knowledge with the scientific study of the natural landscape. Its founders saw the possibilities for a new economy on the Big Island—one based not on dividing and selling land, cutting down trees, selling tropical fish or importing visitors, but rather upon the intellectual wealth of the land, and what it has to teach us. Some of the country’s most respected academic institutions caught on to the idea right away. At the official launch event in Waimea, Oliver Chadwick, a geographer from the University of California, Santa Barbara, delivered a keynote address titled “Hawai‘i as a Model Ecosystem of the World.” Chadwick has been working for years with a team from Stanford University, Cornell University and many others, using Hawai‘i as a base for

unique and important research.

Hanapepe to Harvard to Hawai‘i Island

Matthews Hamabata, a local boy from Hanapepe, Kaua‘i with a Ph.D. from Harvard, was tapped to lead the fledgling organization. “I grew up thinking that all of the interesting employment and professional opportunities would be in Honolulu,” Hamabata said. “With regard to education, it was Honolulu or bust. When I got to Honolulu, it turned out that the big educational and professional opportunities were on the mainland.” Hamabata remembers “sitting in a glass tower in Southern California, staring at miles and miles of traffic streaming by me, feeling distant from all of the communities that I hoped to serve as a staff director for a large foundation” when he got the call from a colleague in Waimea asking him to consider coming back to Hawai‘i to take a look at building an institution to help manifest the vision of the North Hawai‘i community.

“Island residents understood that if we took a really good look at our assets, looked at them not for extractive purposes, not be consumed, but looked at them as life-giving, knowledge-giving assets, we could engage those assets to build wonderful education and employment opportunities right here in Hawai‘i. We don’t have to go to Honolulu and we don’t have to go to the mainland,” says Hamabata.

Island as teacher

Just because Hawai‘i Island has everything it needs for a rich learning environment doesn’t mean the Kohala Center is keeping island resources to itself. Since Chadwick’s keynote address, many other top research institutions have embraced the concept of Hawai‘i Island as a high-quality learning environment. The Kohala Center’s list of partners is a diverse combination of Ivy League universities, government agencies, private foundations and Hawai‘i-based educational, cultural and non-profit entities. Partners include the Hawai‘i State Department of Education, Yale University’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Cornell University, Kamehameha Schools, Edith Kanaka‘ole Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Office of Naval Research—just to name a few.

“We are one of the few independent research and teaching organizations, outside of a university, that invites institutions and scholars from around the country and the world,” says Kohala Center Deputy Director Betsy Cole, “We make it comfortable for them to do work in Hawai‘i with the understanding that they will be respectful and that they will share their knowledge and research.”

Cornell University uses the tagline “The Island as Teacher. You as Student. Mutually Beneficial” for its Earth and Environmental Systems Field Program based on Hawai‘i Island. The program combines extensive field study and classroom learning for Cornell students who get to spend an entire semester studying in Hawai‘i. In addition to Cornell and other students coming this way, the Kohala Center has formed partnerships and raised scholarship money for Hawai‘i Island high school students to attend programs at other universities. Cornell University’s CATALYST Academy, the Brown Environmental Leadership Lab, and the CURIE Academy are some of the programs island students can attend.

It is easy to see how visiting students benefit from being immersed in and studying Hawai‘i’s culture and environment but the academic partnerships are also beneficial for Hawai‘i Island and its residents.

“There is the explicit intention in all of our work with university partners that we create educational and employment opportunities for Hawai‘i Island residents,” said Hamabata. “We currently work with about 50 island-based independent contractors—curriculum specialists, cultural experts, applied chemists, outfitters, scientific divers, graphic designers, copywriters, editors, etc. We are doing our part to really support local family incomes—and those people do fun work. And we need to do more, we need to anchor significant long-term projects. That really gives us the opportunity to build, work with our educational institutions to make sure Island residents are qualified for those jobs we are creating—so they can get paid more than living wages and have steady long-term employment. We have really stuck to our original intent in our work.”

Leading the way

As the community conversation has grown increasing louder about the lack of food and energy independence, the Kohala Center has partnered to produce substantial research reports and recommendations on energy sustainability (Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Management), food systems (Rocky Mountain Institute), waste management and material flows (Yale Center for Industrial Ecology).

“I really hope that we can actually seize the moment and see the current economic and environmental crisis as a tremendous opportunity,” says Hamabata. “I hope we can move fast enough, think quick enough and set the course to value who we are as a people and value our natural and cultural assets so that we can even possibly re-found ourselves as a society and economy.”

Good public policy is dependant on the availability of good information. It is difficult, if not impossible, for leaders to make good long-term decisions about land use, taxes, incentives, building codes, purchases and investments without having current data and concrete, realistic alternatives. The Kohala Center has been instrumental in filling the data and strategic planning gap by providing decision makers with accurate information and proposed strategies.

“We serve the island and help support our development—environmental and social development—in a healthy way with a particular focus on using good scientific information about how we go forward with our resource allocation, and how we use our resources in general—both human and material,” says Cole.

The Kohala Center and the Hawai‘i County Office of Research and Development contracted with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Management to conduct research and provide a report on Hawai‘i County’s energy use and policy. The report, “Analysis and Recommendations for the Hawai‘i County Energy Sustainability Plan” was funded by, and provided to, the Hawai‘i County Council.

Hawai‘i County Council Chair Pete Hoffmann has been leading the legislative charge toward sustainability. “My office has seized upon the opportunity to use the resources` provided by the Kohala Center to begin the process of energy self sufficiency”, says Hoffmann. “The Hawai‘i County Energy Sustainability Plan was eagerly embraced and we continue to use as it a blueprint for further efforts to become energy self sufficient and reduce energy costs to the taxpayer.”

Hoffman remarks in the Kohala Center’s annual report, “The time-honored approach in this county has been to let our plans lie fallow on the shelf. Prior to this time, our energy-related activities consisted of

roundtable forums, which seemed to suffice as the benchmark of success. That day is gone—it was gone 10 years ago. We must now be engaged, committed, and aggressive in our efforts to implement this plan. Nothing in the plan is rocket science, it lays out simple steps and recommendations that need to be implemented.”

The center is now working on drafting a agricultural development plan for Hawai‘i Island that aims to determine how best to use island resources to boost agriculture within five years. It’s a move that is sorely needed, but is no easy feat.

“How to figure out how to make those recommendations and how to move forward is complex,” says Cole. “I know we need to have farmers. As we sort out some of the other problems around distribution, inputs, etc., we need to train, support and pay people to farm. I would reorient our schools to incorporate much more about agriculture and environmental management from K–12. Make it a critical part of our science, social studies and literary curriculum. All the way from elementary school gardens to high school ag programs.”

Big Island. Global impact.

Hawai‘i Island is fertile ground for projects, programs and plans around environmental sustainability. Biofuel research and development, sustainable homestead development, green business support, and community agricultural parks are just a few recent initiatives. A number of guiding documents have recently been completed, including the statewide Hawai‘i 2050 Sustainability Plan and the just-completed Big Island Community Development Plans, to help lead the island into a greener future.

The Kohala Center also has a long-term plan. Hamabata is working with the County of Hawai‘i and a number of university partners including the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University. “The idea is to present Hawai‘i as a long-term research site for ecological approaches to economic and societal health,” Hamabata says. “If we are successful, Hawai‘i Island will become a research site for the next 20–30 years. This would provide us with high quality information and independent analysis about natural resource allocations and the impact that those allocations would have on the way our economy and society develops.”

Just as the food systems study and energy sustainability report have enabled policy makers and business leaders to move forward and take action, the information that would emerge from a long-term study would do the same, but with a whole systems, not piecemeal approach. “Wouldn’t it be great if we didn’t see waste as waste but rather as an input for the agricultural system or our build environment? Outputs of one industry could be the inputs of another,” says Hamabata. “We would maximize efficiency for greater energy and food self-reliance, capture dollars and keep them on the island and create jobs.”

The big local vision, however, gets even bigger. The Kohala Center is built around the idea of Hawai‘i Island becoming a global information resource, and that the science and solutions generated on the Big Island will help other communities and countries solve their environmental problems. Many researchers from top universities already recognize Hawai‘i Island as an ideal research site. The Kohala Center envisions having a campus of several field stations with residential space for researchers. The center hopes to be able to be in a position to invite visiting scholars (with priority

given to people that grew up and/or were educated here), and have an increased ability to set the research agenda.

“If we can do this it will be a tremendous benefit to Hawai‘i Island, but we further position Hawai‘i Island as a global knowledge resource. It moves us one step further to becoming a knowledge based society. It is possible that research and education become leading sectors of our economy. We are committed to Hawai‘i Island youth becoming qualified for these jobs. This leads to additional support for public schools. It boosts the quality of economic and cultural life. These are the types of jobs that could pay more than a living wage,” says Hamabata. “The other thing I love about a knowledge based economy is the implicit recognition as human beings to grow and learn and think...it is very humane. People have to constantly learn and evolve—it deepens the level of human engagement in work.”

In its 2008 annual report, the Kohala Center emphasized the “power of smallness”—the initiation of many small actions which grew into “larger programs, partnerships, conversations, and commitments, and the beginnings of a sea of change.”

Time will tell, but things are looking good for the Kohala Center’s vision of Hawai‘i Island as a global model of community and environmental health.

“We need to raise our own expectations of ourselves. Recognize the potential we have to be a model and expect that of ourselves,” says Cole. “I would like our leadership to believe that, and for our teachers and parents to believe that our children have the same talents and potential that any children in the world do.”

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