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News

Columns

Food

Calendar

A&E

Film

PODCASTS

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Archives



News ▶

Rob Report The year that was The Report looks back—and ahead

by Rob Parsons

write the author

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The past year was all about change, as exemplified by Barack Obama's presidential campaign. My column "Floating Ideas" (2/28) touched upon the cresting wave of "Obama-mentum" washing over the Hawaii Democratic caucus. "True Blue Change" (11/13) reported on my trip to President-elect Obama's neighborhood and the surge of optimism that prevailed in Chicago the day after the election.

Both articles contained other visions of change, as well. The February article detailed the Oceanlinx proposal to establish wave-energy platforms off Maui's coastline in the Pauwela region. The visit to Illinois was aimed at getting the word out—to global ag-conglomerate Archer-Daniels-Midland—that Hawaii residents are not pleased with the idea of converting tropical rainforest to palm oil plantations, then shipping palm oil thousands of miles to replace petroleum diesel in power plants.

The call for change delineated some prevailing Rob Report themes: biofuel debates; renewable energy possibilities; water allocation and legal brouhahas; local food "sovereignty," responsible island planning and political leadership; and the over-riding theme of living sustainably in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

I pondered our precarious circumstances while en route to two other islands, Guam and Bali, back in March. "Peak-A-Boo" (3/6) juxtaposed my in-flight reading, Richard Heinberg's Peak Everthing: Waking Up to the Century of Declines, with the realities of island living. "The promissory note [of our unprecedented consumption of fossil fuels] is now coming due," I wrote. "We must recognize that our future survival as a species depends on whether we will share dwindling resources instead of fight over them."

"Bali Spirit" (3/13) and "Back Into the Wild" (3/20), a conservation success story about the resurgence of the Jalak Bali, or Bali Starling, tested my ingenuity in finding ways to meet printing deadlines from thousands of miles away, in a foreign country where even the electrical outlets are different. Fortunately, I found helpful people along the way.

"As a first-time visitor to Bali, I'm struck by the sincerity and kindness of the Balinese people, so quick to smile and willing to go to great lengths to serve," I observed. "In the context of all the finite resources, they are welcome reminders of the true infinite resources of the world—love, kindness and compassion."

There were times this past year when the enormity of local, national and global problems seemed overwhelming. Take, for example, "The Frights of Spring" (4/10), which detailed rising fuel costs, business bankruptcies and more. In "Global Warning" (4/24), I profiled environmental scholar Bill McKibben, who paid an Earth Day visit to Maui Community College (MCC) and unveiled his 350.org climate change initiative.

"I'm going to depress you for a few minutes," said McKibben. "This rapid, rapid

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change in climate is big enough that it's worth reviewing the cataclysm."

But alarmist reporting of the problems without also providing accompanying solutions is nothing short of depressing. Thus, the thrust of my columns was to follow sobering accounts of the status quo with practical and innovative alternatives, bringing about cause for optimism.

The recent "Malama Kauai" (12/4) offered a template for a community-based organization to promote sustainable, local choices. Likewise, "Cultivating Change" (8/21) summarized the two-day ISLExpo, sponsored by the Sustainable Living Institute of Maui (SLIM).

As one of the ISLExpo speakers, Elizabeth Cole of the Big Island's Kohala Center put it, "we need to cast our nets as widely as possible, and allow for public input, really engage the public. Entrenched thinking is hard to change"!

"Ideas shouldn't remain in paperwork," she continued. "Don't leave implementation to chance. You need to find dedicated, qualified people and pay them a decent living wage."

A wealth of ideas for kick-starting Maui's shift to a sustainable economy was offered in "The Big Maui Bailout" (12/11).

That article contrasted the "same-old, same-old" thinking of our elected leaders, who generously approved not one, but two mega-development projects in South Maui this past year—Wailea 670 and the Makena Resort rezoning. "This Isn't About Jobs" (11/27) concluded with Councilmember Michelle Anderson's quote, "there's no water; with no water, there's no jobs."

While both Wailea 670 and Makena brought overflow crowds to the County Council Chambers, another huge zoning change flew under the radar. "Plantation Politics" (4/17) detailed the council's final approval of 179 acres of retail and light-industrial sprawl on the outskirts of Kahului, despite the question of a legitimate potable water source for urbanizing the fallow ag lands.

With the new zoning, which will surely bring hundreds of millions of dollars to landowner Alexander & Baldwin, Inc., the council extracted conditions for "donation" of acreage for affordable housing, but on A&B land not currently designated for urban use. So the sprawl that was approved will not only extend Kahului's boundaries, but that of Maui Lani towards Waikapu.

"[The County Council] also added a condition that the zoning should not permit any mixture of residential units within the development," I wrote. "Two weeks earlier, in their approval of Wailea 670, they insisted that a third of the affordable housing rental units be constructed in a light-industrial zoned site in North Kihei. Go figure."

Planning decisions were also examined in "Presto-Change-O Zoning" (8/14), which reviewed the morphing of the Kapalua Mauka and Ma'alaea Mauka projects into something quite different than initially approved, and in "Totally Ag-gravating" (7/31), an update on attempts by health food mogul Patricia Bragg to subdivide the Waiehu acreage she claimed would be dedicated to organic farming.

Options for growing food, both locally and beyond, was another recurring theme, starting with "Corn-Ucopia" (2/14), which examined the "a-maize-ing" influence of that crop on our lives. "Corn is the nation's most-planted, most processed, most-subsidized crop," I pointed out. "More than 80 million acres across the U.S. grow corn, and that number is likely to continue rising, due to the push to convert corn to ethanol."

Bringing a local angle to the equation, the article continued, "nationally, 32

percent of" corn is genetically modified, and most of that seed corn is produced in Hawaii. Nearly 5,000 acres of biotech corn were planted" on Maui, Moloka'i, O'ahu, and Kaua'i. Nine million pounds of seed corn were exported last year—a five-fold increase since the 1997-1998 growing season—bringing more than \$94 million to agri-business giants Monsanto and Pioneer."

Another angle on the food-production issue, open-ocean aquaculture, was scrutinized in "Something's Fishy" (7/10). "In terms of food, small farms have given way to corporate agribusiness, genetically modified foods, and huge feedlots to supply the masses, all dependent upon a streamlined transportation system to move products from here to there," I wrote. "In the ocean, entrepreneurs are seeking to improve upon an innovation once practiced by native Hawaiians, fishpen aquaculture."

The article continued: "But the modern open-ocean cages bear little resemblance to the stone fish ponds constructed on leeward shores of Moloka'i and other islands, including Maui. Yet, should they survive the scrutiny of environmental review and economic viability, it is possible that aquaculture operations could play a role in Hawaii's quest for self-sufficiency."

A successful local farmer, Chuck Boerner of Ono Organic Farms in Hana, was profiled in "Fruits of His Labor" (10/25). Five influential local residents offered advice on how Maui may grow more of what we eat in "Real Homeland Security" (10/19). Both Rep. Mele Carroll and Council candidate/Board of Water Supply member Michael Howden identified water allocation to support traditional farming as among the keys to local food security.

A closer examination of water resources took place in "Flowing With The Changes" (10/2), a report of the two-day hearing by the state Commission on Water Resource Management to return flows to eight East Maui streams, and in "Where's The Water, Brah?" (6/12), an in-depth interview with Wailuanui taro grower Steven Ho'okano.

More than a dozen Rob Report columns covered renewable energy and the ongoing push to replace Hawaii's petroleum dependence with imported or locally produced biofuels. With more than \$6 billion leaving the state yearly for our energy needs, it is clear that a new era for our island economy exists in a transition to locally renewable energy. Wind, waves and solar have been discussed in great detail; they need only continued advocacy and public input to bring them into our statewide renewable energy portfolio.

Two columns brought an unexpected amount of response. "Doorway Into Light" (2/7), about Bodhi Be's non-profit efforts to bring dignity into the death/dying/burial process, got a record number of hits online. "Big on Bamboo" (5/8), elicited many insightful perspectives on cultivating this fast-growing crop for food, building materials, papermaking, textiles and even musical instruments.

As always, the Rob Report loves reader input. Let us know the kind of topics you'd like to read more about in 2009. To all our faithful readers, we wish you a happy and prosperous New Year! **MTW**

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