

KOA, MONARCH OF THE FOREST
A Walk through a Legendary Forest
by Linda M. Ogata

An elderly man walks the forest of Keauhou on the island of Hawai'i. He knows it well, for he has come here many times. He swiftly picks his way through the thick growth of tree ferns and mosses covering the forest floor. The air is cool and he breathes heavily, for he is 5,000 ft. high on the east slope of Mauna Loa.

He looks up to search the skies for rain, and sees overhead the spreading branches of the tall, majestic forest trees. He stops to rest under one and gently touches the bark of the tree. It is *koa*, monarch of the forest.

This man is Kuene, *kahuna kalai wa'a*, a skilled canoe maker. He must build a canoe for his chief and now searches for a large tree from which to carve it. In the forest of Keauhou, he is surrounded by *koa*, the tree his people prize for canoe building.

Kuene has helped build war canoes as long as 70 feet from a single log. Lower on the mountain slopes, there is not much *koa* and it does not grow very tall. But Kuene has climbed high, where the air is moist and cool. Here, the trees are plentiful, with many smaller plants like the beautiful and useful *oha kepau* (Lobelias) and *mahihi* (mints).

As he rests, Kuene thinks of his cousin, Kono, on Kaua'i. Several years ago he had been with Kono in Pu'u Ka Pele, near Koke'e. Kono had shown him his family's chosen *koa* tree, nurtured through three generations. The tree was almost 100 feet tall, and with the family's care had grown strong and straight. Kuene had never seen such a beautiful tree.

Each year, Kono would go into the forest and, following a path known only to his family, would care for the tree by trimming away any unhealthy branches. Soon the tree would be felled and hollowed to lighten it. Then, many men from the village at Waimea would come up *mauka* to help drag the log down the narrow canoe path to a shed at the coast. Finally, after so many years of care, a fine canoe would be carved from the log.

Kuene's daydream is broken by a rapid pecking sound that echoes through the forest. As he looks up, a flash of bright yellow and green flits by. It's an *'akiapola'au*! Kuene watches it land on the end of a fallen *koa* trunk nearby and start poking around for insects.

The bird quickly searches the tree from one end to the other, peering over each side of the trunk along the way, and occasionally stopping to probe into small holes with its long, curved upper bill. Suddenly the *'akiapola'au* begins pecking again, this time with its straight lower bill. Using the weight of its body to pry into the rotting wood, the *'akiapola'au* is soon rewarded with a wood-boring insect to eat.

Kuene moves on. The *'akiapola'au* found what it was looking for, but Kuene's search is not yet ended. A short way ahead there is a clearing in the forest, and at the edge of the clearing a large *koa* tree. Admiring the straightness of the trunk, Kuene finds a comfortable place to sit and watch; the tree is large enough for a sturdy canoe, but he needs a sign that the wood is good.

The tree is in bloom, its tiny yellowish flowers grouped into ball-shaped clusters. Near the base of the tree and on some of the lower branches, Kuene sees some tiny leaflets. The rest of the tree is covered with larger leaves that are curved like a narrow moon; Kuene knows these are not true leaves; instead, they are flattened stems, for he has watched how they grow.

As the sun gets low in the sky, Kuene hears many different birds calling out across the forest. Soon, the birds will be getting their final meal before nightfall. Perhaps then an *'elepaio*, the friendly guardian spirit (*'aumakua*) of canoe makers, will come. The goddess *Lea* takes the form of this bird, and Kuene patiently waits for her to appear.

The forest birds are becoming quieter as the evening sky turns orange and pink with the setting sun. Then, Kuene hears a clear, loud whistle. The little *'elepaio* is calling. Kuene sees the bird land on a *koa* branch above him and continue singing, its tail cocked upright. Sitting motionless, Kuene is close enough to see the bird's stiff whisker-like feathers at the corners of its mouth.

The *'elepaio* does not peck for insects in the wood of Kuene's *koa* tree, but instead flies on, calling out what to him sounds like "*ona ka ia*" (sweet the fish). It is a good sign! The wood of this *koa* tree is healthy, and will make a fine canoe.

A young man walks the forest of Keauhou. He does not wear the *malo* or loin cloth of his ancestors. Instead, he is clad in blue jeans and a flannel shirt. He is a Biology student, and carries a back pack and a camera. His name is Haoa, and on this hike he is retracing the steps of his ancestor Kuene.

Over two centuries ago, Kuene had come here to the forest for a *koa* tree from which to carve a canoe. Haoa's grandfather had told him many tales of Kuene, the *kahuna kalai wa'a*, and many Hawaiian legends as well.

The forest is not as Haoa had imagined he would find it. There are no *koa* trees tall enough to match the length of Kuene's canoe. Many *koa* trees are dead, their huge trunks and branches sprawled over the ground. Haoa hears very few birds singing. His grandfather had told him of forests filled with birds, but with the forest dying, these have now become rare.

Haoa looks with sorrow at the sickly forest. *Koa* branches near the ground have been damaged by heavy grazing. On his way to the forest, he had seen cattle and wild goats, which seemed to prefer the *koa* to feed on. He had seen forest areas where feral pigs had dug up the soil, ruining the groundcover of ferns, mosses, and shrubs. He remembered reading about how wild sheep had damaged the forests on Mauna Kea, nearly wiping out the *hinahina* or silversword there, and causing the Palila bird to become very rare.

Such animals were not in Hawai'i during Kuene's time. They were brought to Hawai'i after Captain James Cook visited the islands in 1778. Looking at the damage from

trampling and grazing, Haoa imagines how Kuene would feel if he could see this *koa* forest being destroyed by animals which didn't belong here.

Haoa sits down on a fallen *koa* branch to rest, and starts to put his camera away, for there is no beauty here to photograph. As he reaches out to cover his camera, the lens cap slips from his fingers and rolls under a branch. Reaching down to pick up the cap, Haoa is pleasantly surprised, for surrounded by these fallen branches he sees a splash of red.

Looking closer, he sees the delicate flowers of a very rare plant, only recently discovered. It is the Hawaiian vetch, one of the first native Hawaiian plants to be listed as an endangered species. Haoa had seen a picture of the plant on a U.S. postage stamp.

He knows there aren't many of these. Like the *koa*, the vetch has suffered from being eaten by animals, but under the protection of fallen branches, this one must have been spared. Haoa is happy to have found something special to photograph, and to see the broad seed pods which will produce many new *keiki* seedlings.

That the vetch still lives and produces seeds for a new generation is just a start for the recovery of the *koa* forest as Kuene knew it. But Haoa has hope, for there are plans for the government to buy the land for a wildlife refuge, where rare plants and animals will be protected, and given a chance to grow anew.

Like Haoa and Kuene, we must *kokua* or help our forests. *Malama* means to protect or care for; how many ways can you think of helping and protecting our forests?

The following article, subtitled "Destruction of the Forests," was written more than a hundred years ago (in 1873) by Charles Nordhoff, grandfather of the co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

"The forests of the country are rapidly disappearing, especially from the higher plains and grassbearing slopes. Not only is wood cut for burning, but the cattle browse down the young growth; and a pestilent grub has of late attacked the older trees and destroyed them in great numbers."

"Already complaints are heard of the greater dryness and infertility of certain localities, which I do not doubt comes from suffering the ground to become bare. At several points I was told that the streams were permanently lower than in former years ... now that the ground is bare. But little care or forethought is exercised in such matters..."

A century later, the forests are still being destroyed, but now there are many more threats. Furthermore, our forests are more than just trees; they are the habitat for innumerable unique species found nowhere else on earth... dozens of birds, hundreds of plants and land snails, and thousands of insects. When the forests disappear, these uniquely Hawaiian (endemic) species disappear with them.



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