

How Big Sugar Stripped Hawaiians of Their Own Land and Water

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbUuQ1oBRFU>

Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/hawaii.farming.pdf>

Doing a second update. Here in Kuiaha.

Kaneali'i Williams found documents that could prove he's the legal heir to this land in Hawai'i. But up until last year, he didn't know it existed.

Copies of our birth certificates, death records, marriage licenses to show that not only am I the descendant of this person, but that he had title to this land.

In 2021, he returned to Maui to assert the land rights of his great-great-great-great-great grandfather.

But as he tried to farm, he saw that his river was dry. After last night's rain, all this, prematurely dead.

He began to document his journey and dig for answers.

Is it really that there's not enough rain, or for 150 years, sugar plantations drained water from streams, displacing Native Hawaiian farmers who relied on it.

The river still has no flow. There's still no stream flow in the river. So, where is Kaneali'i's stream water now?

And how have other Native Hawaiian farmers stood up against these sugar plantations?

As heirs to the original title holders of the royal patent, Kaneali'i's documents could prove he has something called Kuleana rights over this land in Maui.

The rights date back to the mid-1800s when the Hawaiian Kingdom awarded Native Hawaiians, who are called Kānaka Maoli, land parcels to farm on.

Kaneali'i stumbled upon a land title registered to his ancestor when he was researching his family's genealogy.

This is our land commission award, royal patent that was given to our kupuna, our ancestor, Nalopi. He's actually my fifth great-grandfather.

This land was given to him by the Hawaiian Kingdom government in the 1850s.

There's a lot of these signs around Maui of the families who are also returning to restore their lands and assert their right to their 'āina, or their land.

The land remained forgotten by his family for generations. Kuleana land titles are inherited, even if the land is unoccupied for decades.

So in May 2021, Kaneali'i moved into a tent to stake his claim and start farming taro, called kalo in Hawai'i.

In Kānaka Maoli culture, kalo is a dietary staple, and also sacred.

Their creation story begins with a kalo plant. The loi kalos are wetland terraces, which means that the water is actually supposed to be inside each terrace.

It comes off the river, goes inside the loi and then goes down, back into the river.

So, it's a very sustainable way of making sure that the water again stays within the Ahupua'a and we don't impact the families that would be downstream of us that also have rights to the water.

However, as you can see, there's no water in our loi kalo. His cousin Jolynn Alconcel has been bringing him supplies. She would also be an heir to the land.

I didn't even know he was on the island until he contacted me and told me what he's been doing and what his plans are.

When we first came here, I'll admit, it was kind of overwhelming just to see, and just to know that this was here and we didn't even know about it. I felt the need to help.

Kaneal'i was raised in California with his mother, who left Maui at 18 because it was too expensive.

His mother was also unaware of the land title. She finally had the opportunity to come home. Even her generation didn't know about this.

It's a generational struggle and it's a generational healing as well for our family.

I will put my life on the line for this land. Because that is what my Kuleana is.

In the state constitution, Kānaka Maoli are guaranteed their right to maintain cultural practices like farming taro. This includes the right to water their crops.

So by law, Kuleana farmers have priority water rights above all other industries.

But sugar plantations still drained streams dry, displacing kalo farmers who relied on them.

Conditions of climate and soil make it possible for Hawai'i to produce large quantities of sugarcane.

Hawai'i's economic life depends in great part on its sugar crop.

Sugar plantations have long dominated politics on Hawai'i, even before it became a state.

In 1893, a group of American sugar planters forcibly overthrew the queen of the Hawaiian monarchy.

They created their own government, which advocated for the sugar industry.

In 2016, Hawai'i's last sugar plantation closed on Maui.

But some sugar companies diversified into other industries and continued to drain stream water for private development.

A sugar company, Alexander & Baldwin (A&B), now controls a water company called East Maui Irrigation. They're still pursuing water permits.

We are on the Hana highway and we're going to Honopou.

Honopou stream is the east farthest stream that East Maui Irrigation and A & B took water from.

There were no watchdogs and they were able to put in as many diversions as they could. It was their aim to get as much water as they could.

Our little piece of heaven - which starts up the stream, across the stream and it goes to that grassy land over there.

And we have our own cemetery, where my mom, my aunt and my cousin are buried. They were in this water fight.

Kalo farmers all over Maui were in legal battles for decades to get their water back.

Lyn Scott is the heir to this Kuleana land in East Maui. For generations, her ancestors have farmed kalo here.

But their stream flow was diverted by a sugar plantation. East Maui Irrigation drained around 165 million gallons of water per day from East Maui to irrigate sugar.

For nearly 20 years, Lyn and her family fought Alexander & Baldwin and East Maui Irrigation in court.

It's been my goal to see these taro patches all in taro again. When I was a young kid, this was all taro.

When we were in the battle, Hawaii Tourism actually said that the tourists come here to see the sugarcane waving in the breeze and that they needed the water to send to the sugarcane so that the tourists could come and see the sugarcane waving in the breeze.

There were many summers that tourists have probably come out here and have not seen a running waterfall because water was taken out of the streams.

It was so dry, there was no water. It seems idiotic.

In 2018, they finally won their case to have their streams restored. As of today, the Honopou Stream is flowing.

But Lyn's mother and aunt both died before seeing the water return.

Out of four of us from this valley that were fighting for our water rights, I'm the only one left. I miss them terribly.

But to see this water here - I'm emotional again - and to know my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren will have this water, they'll know the fight and they'll keep up what needs to be done to keep this water flowing, that's important to me and I think to all Hawaiians in Hawai'i, because we're losing so much of our culture.

It's almost cultural genocide, because people couldn't go back to their taro patches. There wasn't any water to go back to.

Alexander & Baldwin is still pursuing permits to divert water from East Maui streams.

From my own thinking, it's not over yet. They're still trying to get water from the streams.

In Central Maui, Kuleana farmers have been battling another sugar plantation for decades. Love you brother. Thank you so much for everything.

Like I said, we just have to strategize and use the laws we have.

We're not trying to change anybody's law, we just want to use the ones we have.

Crystal Smythe is a kalo farmer and member of Hui o Nā Wai 'Ehā, the organization that led the fight for water in Central Maui.

The common thread between East Maui, this is considered Central Maui and then West, is corporate water users.

Plantation, golf courses, hotels, swimming pools, private mansions.

Over the years, more and more of the taro water that has appurtenant rights has been diverted to those unpermitted users.

The state has repeatedly ruled in favor of Hui o Nā Wai 'Ehā, including in the Hawaii Supreme Court.

But after 20 years, kalo farmers are still facing opposition. More than a year ago, Crystal found that her water source was locked with a chain and padlock.

Our water comes from that valley and Mr. Corporate Rancher, for lack of a better word, has decided to put a lock and a key on that plantation gate.

Twelve months now and we still don't have our water.

All of this again would be water, like rice paddies, but they're kalo, they're taro paddies.

Here, this is normally full of water, going into the pipe, back to the stream. All of this.

The order says they're not supposed to have water, the order says they're not supposed to sell, but they're still doing it.

Like I said, it's in your face. It's arrogant. Crystal is still asking the state to enforce her water rights.

But officials say that they face obstacles, like staff shortages and century-old diversion systems, which are not easy to manipulate.

One year later, Crystal still doesn't have water.

It's just unfortunate that we have to constantly be badgered about wanting to have our own food and our own ancestral cultural knowledge.

Hōkūāo Pellegrino is the president of Hui o Nā Wai 'Ehā, and also a kalo farmer on Kuleana lands.

His stream water has since been restored to his family's farm, but he still helps advocate for other kalo farmers.

He also teaches the next generation about sustainable agriculture and kalo.

Now that we have water back, it's not like this field of dreams, right?

You get water back in the stream, you get water back in the auwai, and all of a sudden you're going to see a flock of people coming to farm.

You have two, three generations that lost this traditional practice and the average age of a kalo farmer is 65 and up.

Two of his interns lost their jobs in the tourism industry during the pandemic. But they now focus on farming, food security and water rights.

People are realizing that we do need food and our water is important to us.

And we need to protect our rights because if we don't continue to use the water, they're just going to take it away. It's not going to be available for us.

Kaneali'i and Jolynn are at the beginning of their journey as they return to their Kuleana land for the first time. Their stream recently started flowing.

They haven't yet proven that their stream water was being diverted. But they don't trust that the water will remain.

As many kalo farmers before them have done, they are determined to keep pushing for answers.

I'm not asking for much. I want to be able to survive on my family's land.

My future goal is to have our family who were pushed off of this island to return back here.

And our kids and our children's children to have somewhere to farm, to show them how it used to be and how it can still be.