

A SON OF MAUI IS "UNCLE OF ALL LIFE"

by David S. Boynton

Standing there in the framework of his old boat house on the beach at Paia, on the Island of Maui, Rene Sylva gestured toward the fishing grounds that put food on many a neighborhood table.

"Hawaiians were very observant," he explained. "They named everything, the landmarks, big rocks, parts of the reef. There were over 1,000 native plants and every one had a Hawaiian name.

"As fishermen, we know most things go by the season. Plants have their flowering seasons. Animals have their seasons too. When enenui come in full of eggs, some plant is in flower. When akule come in, some other plant is in flower.

"We watch the flowering seasons. When the hau comes in flower, first there are a few flowers, then plenty flowers. Fish are the same; first a few come in, then the big schools. Manini in February or March, akule in June, lobster in July, enenui in September... When you know the seasons, all you have to do is look at what plant is in flower and then you know what fish to go for."

Looking down the beach, Rene was the old man of the sea - strong hands, a rugged man with white hair against dark tanned skin, replaying images from earlier decades when life was simpler and fish were plentiful. "My brothers were fishermen, too. We were kind of aggressive, but there was so much back then." Fish populations were wiped out, he believes, because fishing methods and equipment have become so much more efficient, especially since the 1950s.

In Rene's youth, eight or ten canoes were pulled up along the shoreline in front of the Portuguese-Hawaiian family's beach-front home and the style of fishing was not much different from the days of the old Hawaiians. "With a canoe, we wouldn't go out on a day like this," said Rene, as we watched half a dozen youngsters surfing chest-high waves.

Later came flat-bottomed skiffs that were rowed through the surf, and then outboard motors. "Eighteen horsepower was the biggest, and they had exposed spark plugs, so once the water washes up on the engine, you're down. It was just small-time fishing back then."

Fishing nets were made of cotton, and they would rot after three years use. Later there came linen nets, then nylon and monofilament nets that last for years without any care. "The old-timers had to patch their nets. All day long they would be patching nets. Now, they just cut out the bad sec-

tion, put in a new one. Not like before."

"There were plenty of fish until the 1950s. During World War II, they had shut off fishing. Especially the Japanese couldn't go fishing. Schools of fish were breeding because hardly anybody was out there, nobody going out in boats. The war had shut the shoreline off to most fishing, and also most of the men went off to war. So much fish. I've never seen that again. And the turtles!"

The turtles, green sea turtles weighing up to several hundred pounds, once so plentiful, are now a threatened species "Turtle meat was what I liked to eat most," said Rene, as he described how they used to put turtle meat with a few pieces of the juicy green fat between two turtle shells, add some chopped vegetables and spices, and cook it all in the imu.

Rene said he had caught well over a thousand turtles in his time. Some days they would catch eight or ten turtles, most weighing 200 - 300 pounds. His fishing partners wanted to keep the whole catch, but Rene believed the younger turtles should have a chance to grow up to breeding size, and often he would throw back the small ones under a hundred pounds.

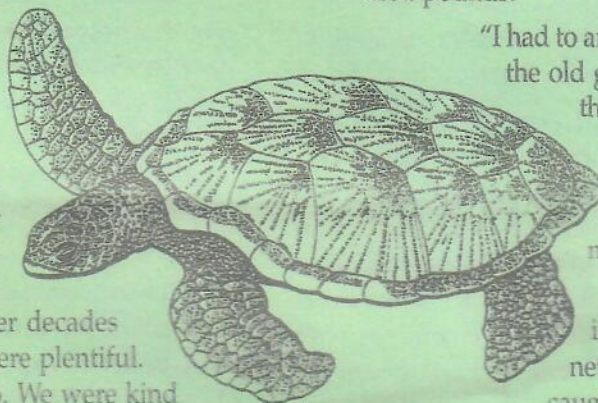
"I had to argue with the other fishermen, especially the old guys. But it was my boat, my nets, so if they don't go by my rules, they're not going to eat turtles. Indecision is a great destroyer. So finally I'd just say: 'No argument. If you like go fishing with me, we do it my way'."

Over the years, Rene began to increase the size of the eye in his turtle nets so that the smaller ones wouldn't get caught. He also put on just a small amount of lead to hold the net down, and lots of floaters on the top line. This way, turtles that were caught could rise to the surface to breathe, and the smaller turtles would still be alive and healthy when they were released.

When the number of turtles took a dive in the early 1970s, government hearings were held to regulate turtle fishing, and to consider listing the green sea turtle as an endangered species.

At the hearings on Maui, Rene said "there was a whole bunch of turtle fishermen and they were angry." It took some bravery on his part, but Rene got up in front of the crowd and voiced his support for strong regulations on turtle fishing "even though I was the biggest turtle fisherman." The proposed rules would allow a person to catch one turtle with a permit, over 30" in shell length so the turtle would reach breeding size, with nets and bang sticks prohibited.

To Rene, that was not enough. "If you're going to protect the turtles, you've got to protect them 100%. Allowing fishermen to catch one turtle leaves the opportunity for cheating.



"We're always blaming someone or something else, but the reason we were losing the turtle was because of guys like me. If I only need two but we catch five, we would slaughter all five. And the guys selling turtle commercially, that was also a problem."

With prohibition of turtle fishing about to become law, Rene burned all his turtle nets. "My friends told me 'Why not sell them so you can get some cash?' But if I sell, then someone else is going to catch turtle. Might as well just get rid of the nets."

A few fishermen are still strongly opposed to laws that prohibit turtle fishing, especially native Hawaiians who believe the laws violate their cultural rights to gather and collect food from the sea.

One thing for sure, since the laws were passed, there has been a great increase in the number of turtles, but most of these have not reached sexual maturity. Because green sea turtles don't breed until they are 20 - 25 years of age, it's going to take a while before a strong breeding population is established.

"Everybody had the idea that there's no way you could fish out the ocean, look how big it is. But you can, maybe not the whole ocean, but look what's happened in our island waters."

Ancient Hawaiians opened and closed fishing areas and seasons under the kapu system, and Rene believes we should try a modern version, the "moving reserve." This modern-day kapu has been tried with good success near Diamond Head on O'ahu.

"Take some areas, maybe a mile or two long and half a mile out to sea, close the fishing there for two or three years, give everything in that area a chance to grow up and breed. This way, a whole, complete breeding cycle has been saved." The kapu area would then be reopened, during the winter when fishing conditions are rough, and the next area of shoreline would be closed. Eventually, the kapu would be returned to the original location and the cycle would begin again.

For Rene Sylva, fishing was the skill of his past, but he is known better now for his work with propagating and preserving native plants. In the 1970s, he developed a thriving landscape of native Hawaiian plants, including many endangered species, at the Maui Zoo. Since then, he has provided thousands of native seedlings for other reforestation projects on Maui and Kaho'olawe.

"We've got to do something to save the native plants," he said. "The result of doing nothing is nothing. But let's do it right from the beginning, give the plants a good fighting chance of survival."

In some revegetation projects, trees have been planted "like troops on a parade field, all in even rows. But nature is not like that. Plant them in a natural way, not all in a row.

"There are lots of people who want to save native trees, but what about the herbs, creepers, shrubs, grasses, sedges,

and ferns underneath the trees? They're important too. These small plants provide habitat for insects, which pollinate flowers and break down leaves. It's also bird habitat, and the birds help to pollinate flowers, and disperse seeds. Eventually, you create a diverse forest."

Rene has been frustrated at the use of non-native species on some revegetation projects, especially on Kaho'olawe where hardy alien trees are being planted. In 1985, he planted 37 different native plant species on Kaho'olawe for the Navy. Some survived, others didn't. "Kaho'olawe will tell us what's working," he explained. "We should use only native plants at native sites. Let's keep it as authentic as you can get it. What if a contractor used hollow tile bricks to make a heiau because it's easier than using rocks? It wouldn't be right. Same thing with plants.

"Why use introduced species? Tamarisk is an Asian tree. Ironwood is also introduced. Look at ironwood, you won't see plants growing under it, or bird nests in it. It's an anti-social tree. We should be smarter now, but we're not. To me, ironwood is a botanical mongoose."

For the time being, Rene is focusing his efforts at creating a diverse native landscape around his home in Paia. He says it will be a seed source, but also "It's mostly for education so people can learn, so they don't have to go into the forest and cut things. People need to learn it right from the beginning, or they'll develop bad habits. People shouldn't dig up plants from the forest. When they do, they always take the biggest ones. The babies get exposed to the sun, so they'll probably die."

Over the past 25 years, Rene has become skilled at propagating native plants from seed, and he's always willing to share with others. "There's a right way to collect plants, and to grow them," he explained. "When you plant native plants, give them a good start but then they should be able to make it on their own. They shouldn't be given too much fertilizer, or too much water." If they grow too fast, he cautions, they won't be able to survive the hard times, such as periods of drought.

Rene would like to see as much concern about native plants as there is on archaeological sites when an area is going to be developed.

"Plants don't get much credit, but think of the ancient fisherman. His canoe, his sail, paddle, nets, fishing lines and ropes were all made of plants. He couldn't go fishing without plants. Plants played a major role in Hawaiian culture; we need to recognize their importance."

Rene will never really be retired. He works for nature, doing something more than just talking about his deep concern for recovering disappearing native plants. Stewardship is in his blood, and the islands' natural environment is a better place for it.

