

RENE SYLVA / 1929-2008

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Botanist championed Hawaii's native species

By Gary T. Kubota
gkubota@starbulletin.com

WAILUKU >> A crusader for the preservation of native Hawaiian plants has died.

Rene Sylva, who helped found the Native Hawaiian Plant Society on Maui, died Sunday at his home in Paia. He was 79.

Sylva, a native Hawaiian, was a widely respected fisherman and self-taught botanist who frequently spoke at public meetings in the 1980s about the need to preserve and nurture native plants.

"Rene was a person of high intellect and of passion," said

"He was a kind of spiritual leader for young botanists. ... All of the conservationists on the island and other islands had a great respect for him."

Robert Hobdy
Retired state forester, on Rene Sylva

Ed Lindsey, a native Hawaiian cultural expert. "Whenever he worked on a project, he didn't go for the easy fish. He went for the deep things that really mattered."

Lindsey said Sylva almost single-handedly brought forth a public consciousness of endemic plants to the government and community to the point where state officials are now trying to grow native

plants along Maui's highways.

Lindsey said Sylva hiked virtually all the valleys and mountains on Maui and knew the location of many native plants, sometimes discovering new species.

One of them was a small white daisy, which was named *Tetramolopium sylvae*.

Retired state forester Robert Hobdy said Sylva had a "real eye for things" on his many hikes in the 1970s and 1980s.

"He spent a lot of time in the field. ... He'd go out and he'd walk around, and he'd find things that other people might miss," Hobdy said.

Hobdy said that when botanists came to Maui, they would call on Sylva.

"He was a kind of spiritual leader for young botanists. ... All of the conservationists on the island and other islands had a great respect for him," Hobdy said.

Sylva worked as the groundskeeper at the now-defunct Maui Zoo in Wailuku and began planting native foliage to the point that it also became known as a botanical garden, Hobdy recalled. When the zoo closed, the area became the Maui Nui Botanical Gardens.

"The garden and the landscaping part was always well done. He did it all without any support. He just took an interest and did it."

Memorial services are scheduled for 9 a.m. to noon Sunday at the Maui Nui Botanical Garden, followed by a potluck lunch.

Sylva is survived by sister Vera Demello, brothers Randal "Buster" and Cecil "Tootsie" Sylva, and 50 to 60 nieces and nephews.

Rene SYLVA