

Hawaii Grown

# One Way To Counter The Ill Effects Of Hawaii's Invasive Species: Eat Them

As Hawaii strives for a more self-sufficient food system, a large cache of protein in the form of feral pigs, axis deer and other invasives could help.



By Thomas Heaton □ □ / January 3, 2022

□ Reading time: 8 minutes.



Foreign flora and fauna have been taking root in the Hawaiian archipelago since the first people arrived on its shores.



In the 1,500 years since, Hawaii has become one of the world's top three hotspots for alien species: More than 1,000 plants, 57 freshwater species, 15 mammals and 3,000 arthropods. Then there are the species in Hawaii's coastal waters.

Some are invasive, directly or indirectly killing off native species or their habitats and compromising the agricultural ecosystem. Others are benign or not fully understood. And while the state pushes for more self-sufficiency in food production to relieve the reliance on imports, the problem of invasives could be an opportunity for Hawaii residents to lend a hand — by eating them.

Hawaii's recent history of introducing species is laced with good intentions and negligence. Mongoose were introduced to control rat populations, taape as a food

source to relieve the strain on ehu and onaga fish stocks. In both cases, the introduced species became malignant.

So consuming them is doubly beneficial, according to University of Hawaii West Oahu environmental scientist Daniel Lipe. Given how invasives have broken the ecological balance, consuming them is an act of stewardship.



Feral pigs, pictured here at a wildlife refuge in Kilauea, Kauai, are part of an informal, non-currency based economy in parts of Hawaii.

“What it does for food as agriculture, it’s going to increase productivity of those islands,” Lipe said. “It’s also going to reduce the destruction of the (endemic) plants that are growing there as well.”

### Meat From Culling Is Not Eaten

For axis deer, introduced in the 1860s, the lack of natural predators led to a population

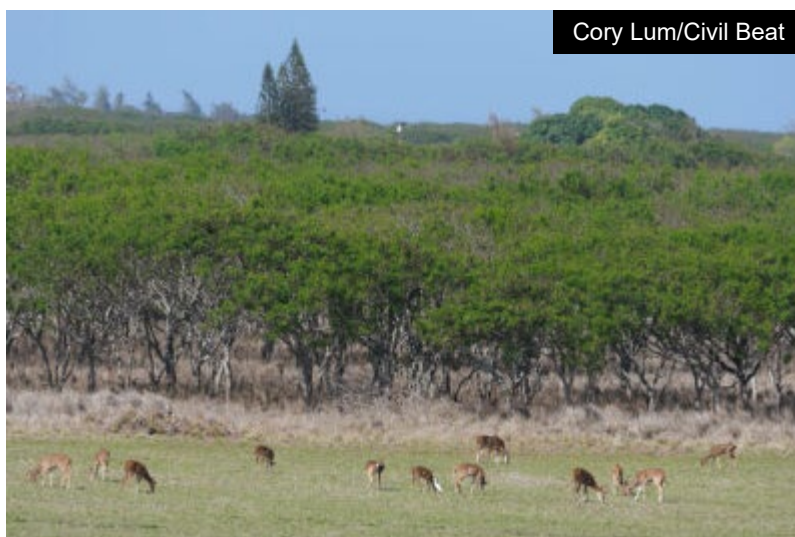
boom. Last year on Molokai, where an estimated 70,000 deer live, thousands died during a drought.

Lawmakers have appropriated funds for the problem, and are [expected to again in the coming legislative session](#), and [culling operations](#) have been in place for years. Likewise, there have been [interagency efforts to deal with invasive species since 2017](#).

But the culling plans are a missed opportunity, according to Lipe. Those pests – including venison and pork – could feed people.

In culling operations, typically either at night with spotlights or by helicopter, the animals are not harvested for their meat. That amounts to wasting “thousands of pounds of food that can sustain our communities,” Lipe said.

Other states, such as Wyoming, have put programs in place to funnel hunters’ excess game into food banks. Others who advocate for eating invasive species have proposed similar ideas for Asian carp or feral pigs. Part of the problem is food safety and animal welfare, due to an inability of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to oversee the process.



Scores of axis deer feed on an open field near the Molokai Baptist Church located in Hoolehua, Molokai on January 15, 2021.

Potential customers would have to be educated on the benefits of eating invasive species. But several businesses are creating a market.

At Forage Hawaii in Kalihi, axis deer from Maui and wild boar from the Big Island are on sale. Owner Jessica Rohr, once a vegetarian, expounds on the virtues of eating sustainably, which in Hawaii means consuming deer and boar and other locally raised meats.

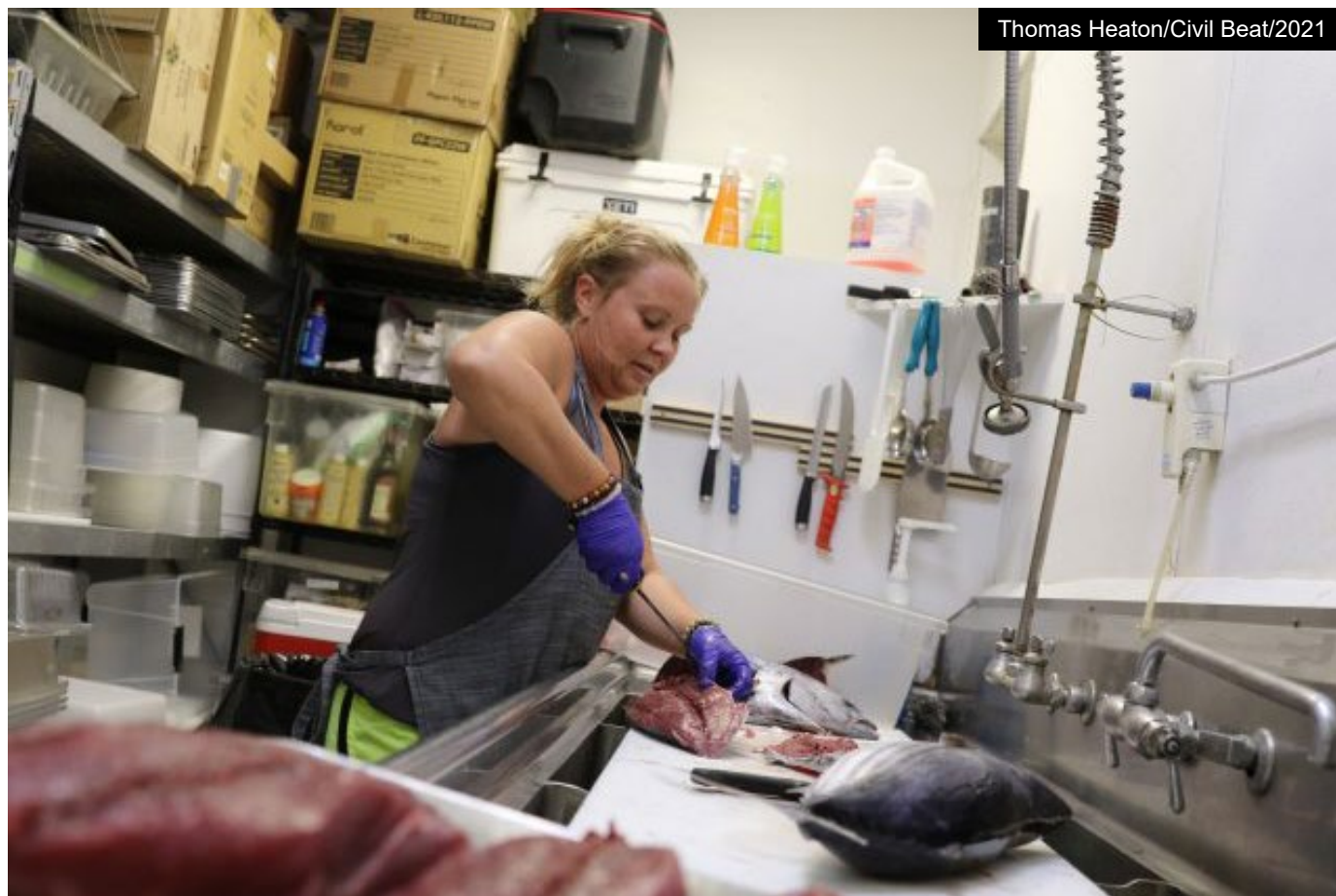
Rohr said it's less than environmentally friendly to consume vegan and vegetarian proteins imported from halfway around the world — especially when eating the plentiful meat at hand might be better for the environment.

“If you're a vegan importing vegan protein from overseas, it just doesn't make sense to me,” Rohr said. A nutrition graduate from University of Hawaii, Rohr believes responsible, locally-grown or raised food is the healthiest choice for people and the environment.

And while Rohr concedes that mainland imports may be cheaper, she says the benefit of eating locally grown proteins outweighs it.

Still, she's loathe to take a hardline approach against vegetarianism or to evangelize about being locavore. Rather it's about finding the most sustainable balance, and integrating it into the diet.

“It should be part of the puzzle,” Rohr said. “I don't think it has to be a binary approach.”



Thomas Heaton/Civil Beat/2021

Local I'a owner and managing partner Ashley Watts breaks down aku, one of her most popular fish, at her Kaimuki store.

Kaimuki business Local I'a sells a diverse line-up, including ahi, ahu and mahi mahi. Its fourth most popular fish is taape, an invasive species also known as blueline snapper. It also sells toau, or blacktail snapper, and uku, also known as grey snapper.

Ashley Watts, owner and managing partner, pays fishermen to catch the pest and has been trying to educate customers about the benefits of eating them.

“A lot of people don't know how accessible these invasives are,” Watts said. “It's kind of a symptom of those barriers that people need to get over.”

Taape has not become an overnight favorite — some see the fish as undesirable because of its color and small size — but Watts includes it to counter its invasive behavior and to create a taste for it. That means also using it in other ways, such as in a fish sauce she is developing. Several well-known chefs in Hawaii [have also been highlighting the gastronomical potential of invasives.](#)



Two thousand taape, also known as blueline snapper, were introduced in the 1950s to ease demand on other fish. But it never caught on.

And given the increasing desire for locally-grown food, taape is undeniably local because no one will import it, Watts says. Local l'a pays \$4 per pound, compared to about \$1 the fishermen might get elsewhere. Watts is trying to give them an incentive.

“That’s because I’m not in it for the money, I’m in it for the conservation,” Watts said.

Maui Nui Venison hunts for venison two weeks per month, shooting up to 200 invasive deer per week, processing them and packaging them for the public. A USDA inspector oversees the hunting, handling and processing, to check for disease and that the animals are not mistreated.

The company has been able to create a niche, high-value business based on an animal considered undesirable in Hawaii because it’s chewing through the state’s natural resources. Axis deer, prized for its flavor, is highly sought after on the mainland and demand has been rising since the business started in 2014.

“I think there’s this [growing movement of a certain segment of society](#) that want to be, and can be, more open to where their food comes from,” Maui Nui’s chief venison officer Bryan Mayer said. “I think what we do is an introduction to that, and I think that’s pretty cool.”

In the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, Maui Nui harvested [139,000 pounds of venison](#). The product is more expensive than mainland meats, but the outfit also donated just under one third of its harvest to food banks. Mayer said products other than venison could never work because of USDA regulations. But that did not mean others could not take up similar ventures, though it may require substantial investment, Mayer said.

### Looking Back To Manage The Future

In other habitats, Hawaii’s invasives are controlled by predators and Mayer believes that has become the role of humans.

“We have to mimic what they used to do,” Mayer said. His only fear is that eating invasive species might go into the “trend category,” meaning it could disappear.

But managing natural resources in Hawaii will require cooperation and understanding of the land, said Lipe of UH West Oahu.

Native Hawaiians would not have let the deer population balloon because of their traditional method of land management, the [ahupuaa](#) system, which centered on maintaining natural balances, Lipe said. “They have the understanding. It’s not just something that we have to come up with and create. We just have to tap into that.”

Lipe, who is Western Band Cherokee, says Native Hawaiian agricultural and land management practices are key to the management of the invasive species. That includes everything from fish and plants, to [feral pigs](#) and deer.

One solution would be to put the responsibility in the hands of local communities, who would be able to take charge and use the invasives to feed their communities, while also integrating indigenous food systems and land management into the contemporary, Western model. That doesn’t mean getting rid of alien species entirely, however.

“It wouldn’t make sense to go back to square one,” Lipe said. “We have to use that knowledge and apply it to what we understand now.”

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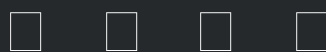
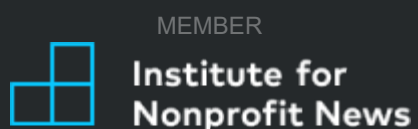
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