

Cultivating Sovereignty: Indigenous Agriculture and Food Security in Hawai'i

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This project explores the ways that small-scale farmers and residents of Hawai'i Island envision food sovereignty and how they make sense of the policies and historical forces that shape their food systems. The purpose is to understand not only the challenges to local food production, but also the visions and strategies that communities develop to build more sustainable and sovereign futures.

The methodology behind this project includes both library research and qualitative data collection. Research in the form of literature reviews provides context and information on the history of Hawai'i's food systems, ongoing entanglements with settler colonialism, and policymaking. This reading is supplemented by semi-structured interviews. During the summer, I spent time in the town of Waimea on Hawai'i Island volunteering and having conversations with people about food. These conversations ranged from informal exchanges to formal interviews, and covered topics such as agriculture bills, food access, and the cultural significance of food.

Despite being entirely food self-sufficient prior to Western contact, over the past 250 years, Hawai'i's food economy has undergone extensive changes. From the boom of sugar and pineapple plantations to cattle ranching to military use, much of Hawai'i's land has become unsuitable for agriculture. At the same time, tax benefits for agricultural property have allowed large parcels of land to be classified as agricultural and sit passively without being cultivated to produce food. Moreover, people's taste buds have changed extensively, reflecting an increasingly globalized food market that outcompetes many locally grown foods at market price. These factors, among others, contribute to an important discussion about food security vs. food sovereignty in Hawai'i.

While both terms have shortcomings, dialogues surrounding them highlight an important distinction between food security and food sovereignty. Many informants described food security as the ability to access food, and discussed food sovereignty as the ability to exercise agency over what ends up on one's plate. Between these terms, food sovereignty is perhaps best aligned with the visions expressed by people I talked with. Yet there is friction between these terms: Hawai'i's current reliance on food shipped to the islands on barges can be seen as enhancing food security while simultaneously undercutting food sovereignty.

Preliminary findings highlight frustration with state and county policies that introduce bureaucratic barriers for small farmers, and also emphasize the role of education, youth engagement, and Indigenous farming practices in creating greater food sovereignty. By situating Waimea as a case study, this project explores how localized practices and knowledge contribute to broader conversations about food sovereignty in island and postcolonial contexts.

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