

Good Neighbor

Photo courtesy Rhiannon "Rae" Tereari'i Chandler-'Iao



Rhiannon "Rae" Tereari'i CHANDLER-'IAO

Oysters might be the answer to solving the state's water quality issue, so a relatively new nonprofit is leading the charge to restore native pearl oysters in nearshore waters.

"It's the first time that something like this has ever been done in Hawai'i using native oysters," says Rhiannon "Rae" Tereari'i Chandler-'Iao, executive director of Waiwai Ola Waterkeepers Hawaiian Islands. "In a way it's kind of a natural and cultural restoration, which is very exciting."

She first got involved with the organization after hearing a lecture from Waterkeeper Alliance's executive director Marc Yaggi, who visited Honolulu as part of the International Union for Conservation. He spoke of the utilization of oysters in New York to clean up the Hudson River, and Chandler-'Iao, along with other enthusiastic individuals, jumped on board to start the local chapter of Waterkeeper Alliance.

The native oyster restoration process is one that's mutually beneficial. In addition to restoring native species to the ecosystem — Hawaiian, pinctada margaritifera and the rare pinctada radiata oysters — the arrangement also uses the oysters' natural process of

gathering food to clean the water.

"To eat, they take in chlorophyll, but they're filtering the water to get their food source, taking out the sediment and particulates that make the water murky," Chandler-'Iao explains. "They can take out staph and MRSA; they can take out oil. They were used in the BP oil spill in the gulf."

Aside from partnering with community partners and officials to implement these oceanic superheroes (in cages, for protection) in local bodies of water, the goal of Waiwai Ola Waterkeepers Hawaiian Islands is to educate the public. To that end, it is in the process of creating an environmental curriculum called Oysters to the Rescue to show people how much these mollusks do for the environment and how humans can be better stewards of the state's natural resources.

The group already has plans to work with Marine Corps Base Hawai'i in Kāne'ōhe and the Marine Education Training Center, where Hōkūle'a docks when she's back home. The latter, says Chandler-'Iao, will serve as an educational platform in which students visiting Hōkūle'a can look at the oysters and learn about water quality at the same time. In addition, there's also a proposal to utilize oysters to clean up the Ala Wai.

Some projects will be starting at the end of this year, and Chandler-'Iao is excited to see what the future holds for this budding organization.

In the meantime, Waiwai Ola Waterkeepers Hawaiian Islands celebrates its launch from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Aug. 24 at 1132 Bishop St. with a free ocean-based art show and silent auction. Talk-story sessions continue at 5:30 p.m. Fridays through Sept. 29.

"Every week there will be a different topic about water," adds Chandler-'Iao. "We chose the name Waiwai Ola because 'waiwai' means 'rich' or 'wealth.' We can't eat or drink our money in the future, so the only thing that really matters is the health of our environment, and particularly the health of our water."

For more information, visit waterkeepershi.org, and to see details on the upcoming art show and installment, visit one.bidpal.net/waterkeepershi.

— Nicole Kato