

▶ AHUALOA: Bevy of small farms have sprung up in the rural Big Island area

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dry," said Discoe, whose parents were self-described "back-to-the-land folks" who settled in the area in the late 1970s.

"There can also be extra-cold drafts coming down from Mauna Kea. I grew up with the climate. I don't mind three straight weeks of rain, but for me, living here is about the community. I feel really connected here."

Discoe grows tea and vegetables on his 2.3-acre property. He says small family farms will become the future of Ahualoa's economy now that the decline of new construction in Ahualoa has left a void in local employment.

"A lot of us are really looking hard at Ahualoa's economic future," he said.

"Growing our own food is a big part of it, but pooling our resources is what will keep Ahualoa intact as a community. We are trading food and skills. We are looking at shifting our staples to things that we can grow here such as taro and sweet potatoes."

Among the many small farms that have evolved in Ahualoa include Hawaii Island Goat Dairy, makers of cheese. Operated by Dick and Heather Threlfall, the dairy boasts a fully automated pipeline milking system designed exclusively for goats.

Takahiro Ino's Mauna Kea Tea also operates in Ahualoa, as well as Eric and Hillary Gunther's Hawaiian Cloud Forest Coffee and Richard Spiegel's Volcano Island Honey Company.

Owned by Stephen and Kimber-Lee Erb, Barefoot Farms makes "Big Jerky" beef jerky, while Ahualoa Hog Farm is a small family farm offering fresh island pork from hogs raised in the natural "homestead" style.

In 2000, Wendell Branco invested in milling equipment and started his own Long Ears Hawaiian Coffee LLC in Ahualoa.

"He buys cherry from anyone and pays a good rate for it," Discoe said. "He roasts it and markets it himself. It helps all the different people here who still have trees."

Because of the sugar industry, neighboring Honokaa was once the most populated town in the Kingdom of Hawaii in the 1890s. Although there were no plantations in Ahualoa,

itself, the community served the local industry, providing firewood carried by wagons to nearby plantations. Until last year, the J.J. Andrade Slaughterhouse run by the Andrade family had been operating in Ahualoa for 100 years.

Ahualoa resident Jill Mattos is the fourth generation of her family to work at the slaughterhouse, which was started in 1906. She now works for Hawaii Beef Producers in nearby

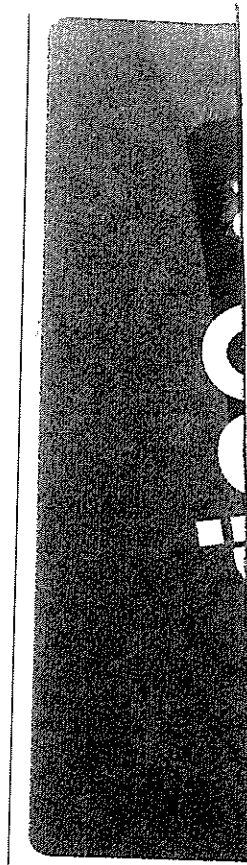
Paauiolo. She says the biggest threat to Ahualoa is development.

"There have been many 5-acre lots being developed in recent years," she said. "Until recently, our neighbors' properties have always been far apart. Unfortunately, all the new development has also led to flooding. The new construction has subsided for now, but it will come back."

For old-timers and

newcomers alike, Ahualoa is a place unique in all of Hawaii.

"I'm happy to be up here," Discoe said. "We've always grown our own food, but lately we've become more serious about agriculture. We recently added a chicken and-egg farm. I happen to be pushing the envelope on sustainability for small family farms. I've found ways to feed my family and neighbors off my 2.3 acres here."



RURAL COMMUNITY LOOKS TO THE FUTURE WHILE EMBRACING ITS PAST

BY KAREN ANDERSON
SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY

At age 83, William Andrade still works his ranch in Ahualoa, driving cattle by horseback, roping, mending fences and tending to the lands that have been in his family since the early 1800s. The Paniolo Hall of Famer says that although life in Ahualoa has changed noticeably in the last 15 years, the beauty and simplicity of the area remain, despite the influx of new homes and residents.

"I would like it to stay like it is right now, but life goes on," he said. "Ahualoa is a nice, peaceful place but there's been a lot of development in the last several years. I used to know everybody here. Now I don't."

Located on the Hamakua Coast 13 miles from Waimea, Ahualoa is an unincorporated rural area that was originally settled by Portuguese ranchers and Japanese farmers to serve the once-thriving sugar plantations nearby. The area was also known for its coffee production long before Kona became the center of Hawaii-grown coffee. Some of the older homes in Ahualoa still have sliding roofs for drying coffee. Abandoned coffee trees can still be found.

"Coffee was here before it ever came to Kona," said Josephine Andrade, Ahualoa native and wife of the late John Andrade, William's brother. "The coffee trees are more skimpy in Kona; ours were big and full with big cherries."

The area's most predominant characteristic, however, is the plentiful rainfall that often lasts for weeks on end, making Ahualoa one of the wettest locations on the Big Island. Residents report that for the last three months, rain has been falling almost daily.

"We had been in a drought for the last several years, but now we are back to the olden days when it rained for solid months at a time," she said. "It was always a big event when the sun came out."

Because of the soggy climate, Ahualoa is not for the faint of heart. Longtime residents like Ben Discoe observe that newcomers often change their minds about living in Ahualoa because of the wet.

"You must have a centrally located wood stove with heat that can reach all the rooms of your house to keep things

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