

The Plant Seekers

Sometimes you've got to take a risk when saving a dying species.

ENVIRONMENT

RAPPELLING OFF CLIFFS? HIKING into the unknown jungle? It's just another day at the office for the coordinators of the Plant Extinction Prevention Program (PEPP). The goal of these hard-core individuals is to prevent the extinction of Hawai'i's native flora. About half of Hawai'i's 1,200 native plants are either endangered, on the road to becoming endangered or are considered a species of concern.

PEPP, which is under the Department of Land and Natural Resources' (DLNR) Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW), has a target list of more than 180 species that have fewer than 50 individuals remaining in

existence. "We take on species if no other agency is looking after them, or if they are slipping through the cracks because they're located on private lands or if they are simply too remote for people to deal with," says Vickie Caraway, DLNR state botanist.

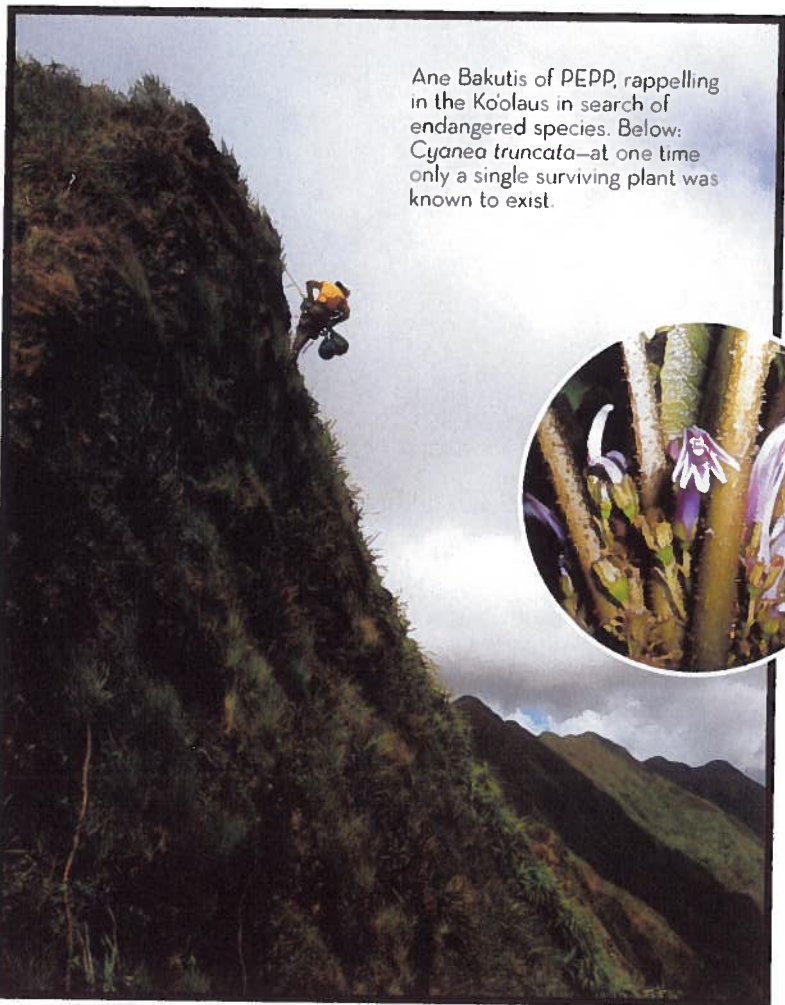
So what are these fearless folks actually doing out in the wild? First, they have to do a little research. Caraway explains, "One way that the coordinators get a history of the species is by going to an herbarium to find previous samples of the plant." She adds, "The location of where the sample was found is always noted, so coordinators will then go back to that area and find those specific populations. If they aren't there, then they'll document that they're dead. But if they are, then they'll collect cuttings or seeds and store them for future planting and restoration work." The O'ahu coordinator, Ane Bakutis, is currently monitoring about 20 species.

Caraway is also the co-chair of the 20-year-old organization called the Hawai'i Rare Plant Restoration Group (HRPRG), which started PEPP. One of its success stories includes a plant named *Cyanea truncata* in the Lobelia family. About 5 years ago, HRPRG found the only known individual in a drainage ditch on the North Shore area. Two years ago, Bakutis and some of the other coordinators planted its seedlings on the North Shore. Approximately 10 of them are still surviving, another three have since been found in the wild.

By the end of this year, PEPP will hire a coordinator for the Big Island and Kaua'i, which adds to the already established coordinators on Maui Nui and O'ahu.

Volunteers frequently accompany PEPP workers, as PEPP's No. 1 rule is, "You never go out alone." Caraway says, "When I see some of the extreme pictures of coordinators collecting seeds and cuttings, I always think, 'there's no way I would do that!' They don't just go out to the Ko'olau Ridge and look over the edge, they actually go over the other side of it!"

SHEILA SARHANGI



Ane Bakutis of PEPP, rappelling in the Ko'olau in search of endangered species. Below: *Cyanea truncata*—at one time only a single surviving plant was known to exist.

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