

Roots in the Ground

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Sustainable Travel Meets Hawaiian Legacy at Gunstock Ranch

Up here, the dirt is red, rich, and loose. It's the kind that stains your hands before you've even started getting them dirty. The Ko'olau Mountains seem to hold the sky in place. And the ocean is a thin bright line in the distance. Welcome to Gunstock Ranch in Kahuku, 800 acres on O'ahu's North Shore that mark the birthplace of the 'Alohilani Forest. It's also one of the most meaningful eco-friendly things to do in Oahu.

It's not the kind of locale most visitors to Hawaii expect to find themselves. There are no poolside cocktails or DJs to set the mood. Your only soundtrack is the open land, the swaying of young trees, and the quiet work of giving back to the earth.

At 'Alohilani, we talk often about connection to place. But connection isn't something you can package into a view or a welcome lei. True connection, the kind that stays with you even after you've returned home, asks for something in return: your participation.

That's what happens at Gunstock Ranch.

The property sits at the base of the Ko'olau Range, at what is known as the piko, or navel, of the mountain. In Hawaiian understanding, this is a place of origin, a center from which life radiates outward. "It's not by

accident that the birthplace of native trees is coming from Gunstock,” says Lilia Tollefson, the ranch’s Chief Operating Officer.

The vision of Gunstock Ranch is ambitious and deeply specific: to restore an original Hawaiian forest to its former glory. The effort is part of the Hawaiian Legacy Forest, a reforestation initiative focused on native tree planting across Hawaii. “Our dream is to have what the land would have looked like before people came and meddled with it,” says wrangler Kali Marino.

Phase one covers a modest 80 acres. Greg Smith, Gunstock Ranch’s owner, hopes to expand even further, high up into the mountains. It’s a model that redefines what sustainable travel in Hawai’i can look like - reducing impact and actively restoring what was lost.

So far, 20,000 native trees have been planted, including milo and koa, two of the most culturally significant species in the islands. But those numbers tell only half the story. The real impact is happening above ground.

Guests who join the planting experience expect a fun diversion. They find something closer to a ritual instead. Every tree is planted for a specific person or reason. Before the first watering, participants are invited to hold their hopes, memories, and whatever else they carry and pass that mana into the earth alongside the water.

It’s proof that magic doesn’t always need incantations, reagents, or fancy garb. Hands in the soil. Water from a bottle. A few quiet words - or none at all. A spell is cast.

“Something happens when you get your hands dirty,” Marino says. “You watch it in people’s eyes, and they’re like, ‘I didn’t think that’s how I was going to feel about a tree.’”

People arrive curious. They leave Gunstock Ranch changed.

This is what we mean when we talk about sustainability at ‘Alohilani. It’s not about checking a box or earning a certification - though we hold those, too. As the only carbon-neutral hotel in Waikiki, ‘Alohilani is the proud recipient of the Green Key. We mean sustainability is a living practice. A relationship with the land that welcomes appreciation but demands reciprocity.

The trees themselves are patient teachers. A milo sapling doesn’t look like much the day it goes into the ground: small, thin, barely distinguishable from a weed. But milo is one of Hawai’i’s most enduring native species. Every new plant represents a quiet act of faith in what this place used to be. And what it can become again.

Guests don’t need to know the full ecological story to feel what’s happening. The mountains do the talking. The red earth does its part. And by the time you’re standing over a newly planted tree, watching water darken the soil around its roots, the experience has already moved past observation into something personal.

That’s the shift. When you visit Gunstock Ranch, you stop watching Hawai’i from a distance and start becoming part of its story. Even briefly. Even in a small way.

At ‘Alohilani, we believe the most meaningful experiences are the ones that ask for something in return. Whether it’s a day trip from Waikiki to the North Shore or the centerpiece of your stay, Gunstock Ranch makes simple requests: get your hands dirty, give a tree its first drink of water, and carry a piece of this place with you when you go.