

Membership Spotlight: A Conversation with Bart Potter



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Bart Potter
HFIA Founding Member, Former Board Member and
current Business Member

AB: How long have you been a member of HFIA?

BP: I was among the founding members of HFIA back in 1989. A group of sawmill owners, forest resource owners, and forest managers coalesced around a series of small sawmill workshops. We came to the realization that there was a need for the resources on which we depended to be managed for future abundance and that it was our responsibility to bring together people who would work to protect and conserve existing native forests, to manage existing planted forests and to create new model forests. HFIA was born out of that recognition.

AB: How did you come to have an interest in the forest industry/woodworking? How long have you been working in this field?

BP: My siblings and I grew up hiking and playing in the heart of what I later learned were the Tantalus forest plantings undertaken by the monarchy in the mid 1880s. Thus began a lifetime of observing the growing planted forest. I grew up in a redwood house my parents built on Tantalus on Oahu in 1951. I think the seeds of my interest were sown when as a child I was enthralled with watching Thomas Takeshita, a master carpenter, who in making repairs and modifications on our house, worked with his three sons. They all employed traditional Japanese woodworking tools as well as modern tools. In mid 1974 I began a one year apprenticeship at Guitar and Lute Workshop in Honolulu. When GLW closed their doors in 1975 I set up shop in a house I was living in and made guitars and ukulele through 1979. I wanted to be able to process wood specifically for instruments and in 1982 I bought a Mobile Dimension circular sawmill and soon began to cut wood that catered to the requirements of luthiers. Around 1995 I purchased a game-changing wide-band horizontal sawmill that enabled me to raise yield, lower waste, and quartersaw more readily. Supplying luthiers has been for years and remains the most important part of my business.

AB: How long have you been involved with the annual Hawaii's WoodShow?

BP: I've been involved with the show since it was just an idea—the product of an early brainstorming session between founding members of HFIA. That rather vast idea was to use the show as a vehicle for HFIA's mission to illustrate and demonstrate that if we can manage our forests to insure their health, bounty and ability to cycle an abundance of life in perpetuity, we in turn will benefit from the gifts of the forest, a fundamental one of which is water.

AB: What does HFIA mean to you? What value has it added to your life?

BP: HFIA has enabled me to interface with a wonderful array of inspirational, motivated, and concerned people who collectively and individually have unwittingly guided and shaped my own outlook.

AB: What do you see as Hawaii's greatest challenge in regards to forest health? What do you see as Hawaii's greatest challenge in regards to the forest industry?

BP: Alarming and increasingly, an army of aggressive plant, insect and fungus species are invading, outpacing, smothering and otherwise diminishing the quality, health and future prospects of both native and planted forests in Hawaii. Controlling invasive species is critical to reversing the attrition they cause.

I also see challenges in extracting and processing quality wood from the urban waste stream and challenges in managing our climax-stage, over-mature non-native forests. I see challenges in the production, marketing and selling of products made from trees from those forest types. There is a nascent constellation of processors who would benefit from increased inter-communication so that first, all parts of a harvested tree are converted into products including veneer, lumber, engineered wood products, mulch, compost and biomass energy and second, lands that support forests are properly managed. HFIA's challenge continues to be to provide a forum for all who have a part to play in charting the future of Hawaii's forests.

AB: Is there anything you are working on right now that is particularly exciting that you'd be willing to share?

BP: About a year ago, Haleakala Ranch accepted some Koa seed that I pulled from an inventory of seed I've been able to collect from exceptional trees I have known over the last 35 years. HR retained Maui Native Nursery who "sowed" my seed (along with other seed sourced by HR) around July of 2021 and nurtured the seedlings to planting-readiness. The seedlings were just outplanted into an experimental silvopastoral paradigm in early January. I'm very excited to have had a small part in that project and look forward to seeing the forest grow.

AB: What is your favorite wood to work with? What is your favorite native Hawaiian tree/plant in general?

BP: Vive la difference! I have no favorites, though I do subscribe to Tai Lake's observation that a dying woodworker's choice of wood with which to spend eternity might be *Swietenia mahagoni*, or what we call Cuban mahogany. As for a favorite native Hawaiian tree, again, no favorites. Of course I recognize and revere Koa and Ohia, but I do see other endemics that I hope can someday figure more heavily into public and private landscape and forestry planning such as: Oahu Ala'a (*Planchonella spathulata*), Kolea (*Myrsine lessertiana*), Kawa'u (*Ilex anomala*), Ahakea (*Bobea elatior*), and Kauila (*Alphitonia ponderosa*).

AB: Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

BP: I could add that I love the diversity of professions, perspectives and priorities within our membership, the different interests coming together behind a rather giant and nebulous ideal... I think the industry will best thrive with an ongoing influx of people (new blood!) who, through their own passions and in their own enlightened self-interest, get swept into this continuum, the goal of which is to maintain healthy forests answering many descriptions that in turn provide us with water and the many forms of wealth that water enables.