The Terminators

Story by Paul Wood

Photos by Monte Costa

It's a Saturday night and we're sitting in Darrell Tanaka's garage, Island style—no cars, just picnic tables and coolers. Bright illumination spills out into the quiet, velvet darkness of Ha‘iku, Maui. Darrell's wife, Jackie, darts out of the house bearing beautiful roast salmon fillets. The array of food on the garage's side tables is stupendous, way beyond what the twenty or so guests could possibly eat. Out comes a chocolate cake decorated to look like the fish everyone will be hunting tomorrow. It's got black frosting with blue dots—a peacock grouper, better known as roi.

Though it's Saturday night, and though the guests are mostly young men, the mood is sedate. People converse in twos and threes. Some have come from other islands to be here, a few from the Mainland. This is not a party, but a preparation. Tomorrow at dawn most of these people will be slipping into the reef waters of West Maui to shoot fish that nobody wants. They're coming together for the November '09 Roi Roundup, the fifth such tournament since these events began just a year and a half ago.

The spearfishers at this gathering come from every part of Island life. Darrell Tanaka himself grows orchids for a living. Several are community college students. One young man works as a detailer for a Kahului car dealership. Another, from an Upcountry Maui Chinese family, works as a chef; he has brought his family tonight, including the keiki, one of whom is a first-grader at Kahului School. Two O‘ahu divers are here, Kimi Werner and Lance Otsubo; a previous roi roundup raised money for these two to represent Hawai‘i in the 2008 national skin-diving tournament, where Kimi took the women's crown. Everyone here is focused on spearing a lot of roi—or as the divers think of them, vermin.

At one point during the conversational buzz, Darrell starts talking about tomorrow's competition. "This isn't just a fishing tournament," he says. "It's an environmental movement."

The Terminators (Page 2)
Why hunt fish that you don't want? To get rid of them.

Some background: In the 1950s the Hawai‘i government introduced many foreign species of fish on the Hawaiian reefs, hoping to increase the near-shore fishing yield. In those days the dominant thinking went something like this: A fish is a fish, so the more the better. These days we feel differently about the value of native species and original resources. But what's done is done.

Ten species of fish were brought from French Polynesia and released into Island waters. Three species survived—two kinds of snapper (ta‘ape and to‘au) and Cephalopholis argus, the roi. Only 2,385 roi were released, and for quite a while no one much noticed; during the '70s and '80s roi were considered rare. But during the '90s the roi population boomed, and the fish took its place as the number-one consumer of native fish on Hawai‘i's reefs. The roi, its skin covered in sapphire specks, has a gemlike brilliance underwater, but hooked and hanged it's a saggy black thing, its gills lurid red, its jaws rimmed with needle-width teeth.

In a perfect world, roi can be turned into a not-too-bad entrée. In the real world, however, eating roi can result in an unpleasant form of food poisoning called ciguatera, a painful and recurring ailment triggered by an accumulation of single-celled creatures known as dinoflagellates. These toxins get concentrated in the tissues of predators at the top of the food chain like roi. Today this fish is "the dominant resident predator on many nearshore reefs in Hawai‘i," wrote ichthyologist Jan Dierking in his 2007 doctoral thesis on this subject. These invasive fish, he wrote, are "a particularly important source of mortality for the early life history stages of prey fish populations."

In other words, every time a spearfisher swims past a roi and chooses not to spear it because it's a "junk" fish, that roi will live on to consume native reef fish—each roi eats an estimated 146 of them each year, and over the past twenty years populations of native reef fish have declined dramatically. Spearfishing has changed, too, from a subsistence-living activity to a specialized sport. That's the main topic of conversation at Darrell's garage gathering, and Darrell, quick-witted and easygoing, thinks that he and his friends can do something about the situation. He likes to tell them, "No resource, no fisherman." He believes the day has come that the reverse is also true: "No fisherman, no resource."

The Terminators (Page 3)

It all started this way: Brian Yoshikawa—who operates his family's store, Maui Sporting Goods—wanted to stage a tournament to raise money to send Kimi and Lance to the

nationals. He and Darrell started talking. “This wasn’t dreamt up as a conservation movement,” says Darrell. “We just wanted to raise some money for a good cause.” Then he pauses. “But we didn’t want to deplete the reef.”

Kuhea Paracuelles had a lot to do with planting that last thought in the minds of these two respected members of the diving community. Kuhea is Maui County’s environmental coordinator. She came to that job with great enthusiasm for such causes—she’d held former posts at the Kahoʻolawe Island Reserve Commission, Hawaiʻi Volcanoes National Park and The Nature Conservancy, for example. “She’s Miss Multitasking Organizational Person,” Darrell told me. “She is fantastic.”

In June 2008 Kuhea and the county staged an “International Year of the Reef” awareness event at the Maui Ocean Center. Part of this event was a taʻape cook-off to encourage greater consumption of that other roi-era invasive fish. She needed people to help her catch the necessary taʻape and so recruited Darrell and Brian.

That experience got the two skin-diving friends thinking. Roi is a fish that makes a challenging target for spearfishers. Its natural habit is to look head-on at a diver, trying to see what’s coming, then dart beyond reach into holes in the reef. That habit makes roi good sport. (Toʻau and taʻape are schooling fish better caught by other methods, such as nets.) The idea simply grew together from its parts. Why not create a “Roi Roundup” that combines a hunting challenge with reef health—and while you’re at it, raise money for your needies?

Darrell and Brian staged the first roundup in July 2008. Teamed in pairs, fifty-four divers competed and brought in only eighty-eight roi. “The weather conditions were horrible, and many divers didn’t know where to find the roi,” says Darrell. “We don’t traditionally hunt in those areas. I only brought in three.”

The roundups continued—in ’08 and ’09—with the number of divers remaining about the same, a cadre of friends dedicated to the cause. Each tournament has raised funds for a cause. (One, for example, helped pay medical bills for popular diver Sean Stoddelle, who suffered from terminal brain cancer.) What’s changing is the ability of the divers to spear roi. So far, between the roundups and monthly “kill roi” days targeted at specific reef areas, the divers have nabbed about two thousand invasive predators, reducing their impact by approximately 292,000 native fish per year.

The dead roi are not wasted. Some are sent to the University of Hawaiʻi for use in ciguatera research. Many are sold to the Maui Ocean Center as shark food. Local organic farmers compost them.

Kuhea Paracuelles got the general community to rally round the roundups—a hundred or so businesses at this point are offering contest prizes, services and support, plus a staging ground for the event: the Hard Rock Cafe in Lahaina.

So it's Sunday dawn in Lahaina, on the sidewalk in front of the Hard Rock Cafe. Folks from Darrell's garage are in a different mood now, zipped into full-body camo wetsuits, downing Spam musubi and gearing up to charge the reefs. Brian Yoshikawa plays emcee, laying out safety rules with stern emphasis. (Darrell says, "Brian is like the wedding coordinator for the tournaments. Because he runs his family fishing shop, he's participated in a ton of tournaments.") Brian outlines the boundaries of the competition—about twelve miles of West Maui coastline from Papalaua Park near the pali (cliff) tunnel north to Hanakaʻoʻo Park just before Kaʻanapali. That's plenty of room for the twenty-eight teams of two divers each, and the contestants disappear quickly.

As predicted, recent swells have turned the nearshore waters murky. But as the noon deadline approaches and divers come walking back along Front Street, wetsuits now unzipped, carrying strings of shiny black saggy fish, they report beautifully clear water once they'd pushed out past the nearshore murk. Hanging their catch on the weigh station set up by Brian's crew from Maui Sporting Goods, they add their part to the tally. It comes to 264 invasive fish, which reduces the reef depletion of native fish by about 38,500 a year.

Now the real party begins. The Hawaiian band Hiki No plays on the Hard Rock stage. Maui Mayor Charmaine Tavares arrives smiling, as does state Sen. Roz Baker. Emcee Brian hits his stride giving out raffled goodies. (The US Census Bureau, for example, has donated dive bags. No question, "Miss Multitasking" Kuhea has been working hard behind the scenes.) Silent auction items are displayed, and Brian says, "We have a little jar here, but it's got a big opening—just like your hearts." The divers are laughing and giving much more than they're getting, but they're getting a lot in return, mostly honor. The primary tournament gift goes this time to the late Sean Stoddelle's teenage daughter Jordyn, to start a college fund. "Sean was into this preservation work long before it was cool," Brian says. "We're going to send doctor-to-be Stodelle to college. She's going to become an ichthyologist, come back and save our reefs."