

Sandalwood



Trade overview

Fur Trade

At the center of the changes of Hawaii is its strategic position in the Pacific. "Crossroads of the Pacific" the Islands are called -- and with reason. In the long voyages between the Orient and the Western World, Hawaii has served as an ideal stopping point. The first to love its conveniences were the fur traders, who brought their ships from the Northwest Coast (what is now British Columbia, Washington and Oregon) across the Pacific to China and other countries Asia. In Hawaii they could obtain whatever provisions they needed at extraordinarily low prices; they could also employ (find new crew) any extra help they might need for the Hawaiians were excellent seamen.

Commenting on the convenience of the Islands, one American fur trader wrote:

"What a happy discovery these Islands were! What would the American fur trade be without these to winter at and get every refreshment? A vessel going on that trade will only need sufficient provisions to carry her to these islands, where there is plenty of pork and salt to cure it, and yams as a substitute for bread."

Sandalwood

While the fur trade put Hawaii definitely on the commercial map, it was not until the discovery of sandalwood that the Islands began to become very important economically. There was enormous demand for it in China, where the fragrant wood was used in the manufacture of incense and fine pieces of furniture. The traders received good prices for the sandalwood by trading it for silks and porcelain which they sold in the United States for a huge profit.

To encourage the gathering of sandalwood the traders were willing to bring to Hawaii whatever the natives demanded in return. King Kamehameha the Great. Kamehameha had a complete monopoly on the product, which means he owned and sold all of it on all of the islands. It was Kapu for anyone else to sell or trade sandalwood. After his death, his successor, Kamehameha II (Liholiho), shared it with his chiefs, enabling them to get firearms, boats, large quantities of Chinese goods, and a fortune in foreign money. Unfortunately, almost no effort was made to preserve the young trees or to replace those which had been cut down--by 1830 the sandalwood trees had disappeared from the Hawaiian Islands.

Whaling

Hawaii's strategic position in mid-Pacific helped to bolster its economy. A valuable sperm whale fishery was discovered off the coast of Japan. Midway between the southern and arctic whaling grounds, the Islands once more became a convenient place for ships to find rest, water and fresh food. Japan's refusal to let foreigners into their harbors to fix their ships and restock their ships with food made Hawaii very important to whalers. As early as 1824 there were 104 whalers that visited Hawaii; by 1844 their number had increased to 490.

Hawaii's Sandalwood Empire is Long Gone

By Duane Choy



History is full of stories of the destruction of natural resources. In Hawai'i, human greed was particularly devastating for sandalwood. Hawai'i was once known as Tahn Heung Sahn — Sandalwood Mountains — to the Chinese, because of it was filled with this fragrant tree. Hawaiians called sandalwood 'iliahi and sometimes la'au'ala.

In 1790, Capt. John Kendrick of the Lady Washington set out from Boston for the northwest coast of America to acquire seal and sea-otter furs for trade with China. Kendrick made a stop in Hawai'i to replenish his ship with wood, water and salt. Sailing from Kaua'i, he was excited by a familiar odor from a cooking fire. Was it sandalwood — the very item that was rising in value in the world as India's the supplier of the world's trees disappeared?

Hawaiians, who used sandalwood mainly for minor medicinal treatments, could not understand the trader's obsession with the tree which was so valuable in Asia. It was because of sandalwood that foreigners introduced Hawaiians to the concept of credit. Merchants used simple to extravagant items (military uniforms, liquor, guns, silks, leather, silver mirrors, and brass cannon) to barter for sandalwood.

Pricing was based on 133.3 pounds of wood, at \$8 to \$10 dollars per 133.3 pounds. Kamehameha I attempted to cash in on the sandalwood trade. He purchased a ship which he named the Ka'ahumanu, and in 1817, with Capt. Alexander Adams, he sailed to China. But because of China's port fees, he failed to make a profit. Returning to Hawai'i, Kamehameha capitalized on his lesson, imposing an anchorage fee of 80 Spanish dollars for every ship sailing into Honolulu harbor.

When Kamehameha died in 1819, the monopoly on sandalwood that passed on to lesser chiefs took a downward plunge. In December 1826, the kingdom of Hawai'i enacted its first written law — a sandalwood tax. Every man was ordered to deliver to the government 66 pounds of sandalwood, or pay four Spanish dollars.

This period saw two major famines (people starving to death) because sandalwood was harvested to the point of extinction in Hawai'i forests. The common people were taken away from their agricultural and fishing duties, and all labor was used to harvest sandalwood. Hawaiians were nicknamed "kua leho" (callous back) because of the shoulder calluses they developed carrying the sandalwood logs.

Trails into the forests were sometimes nonexistent, and work continued into the night. 'Iliahi was tarnished by blood as Hawaiians suffered famine (starvation), disease, exposure, malnourishment and exhaustion. As agriculture (farming) declined from neglect, and imported goods.

Today, there isn't a single untouched natural sandalwood forest left on the planet. Hawai'i is no exception, with only isolated sandalwood is scattered in Hawai'i's forests

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAWAIIAN SANDALWOOD EXPLOITATION

During the latter part of the 18th century and early part of the 19th century, a series of events occurred in the Hawaiian Islands that had important effects on both the natural environment and humans. The third Pacific expedition of Captain James Cook arrived in Hawai'i in 1778, ushering in the historic period for Hawaii. Alien species, new materials, and new ideas entered the remote islands and caused many changes in activity, including politics and how the Hawaiians interacted with nature.

Kamehameha the Great rose to power and united the islands. During this period, the trade value of Hawaiian sandalwood became known to many foreign traders and native chiefs. Before Hawaiian sandalwood was sold in Canton China, most of the wood sold in China it was taken from India. Around the end of the 18th century, the supply of sandalwood from India was becoming very small. This shortage of sandalwood resulted in a higher price for sandalwood.

In the very early years of the sandalwood trade, the American traders dealt with only Kamehameha the Great himself. Kamehameha accumulated large amounts of luxury (stuff not needed but makes life more enjoyable—think iPod) goods.

The great burden of harvesting the sandalwood was given to the common Hawaiian people. The King "...ordered men to go out in the mountains to cut sandalwood," and then to transport this heavy harvest "... to the ports" (Kuykendall 1938). Because of the lack of roads and vehicles the wood "...was carried down in the form of logs, 3 to 6 feet long, and from 2 to 18 inches in diameter, on the backs of the Hawaiian men.

Large numbers of people were involved in the harvesting and handling of the sandalwood. Frequent transport of heavy loads of sandalwood often produced callused (hard like the bottoms of your feet) areas on the shoulders of males. Men with these marks were called *kua-leho* or "callous backs". Sandalwood harvesters were often gone for several days, sometimes for weeks, in the mountains collecting sandalwood. Many died of in the cold, often damp uplands.

"It has been said that every piece of sandalwood cut during those years was stained with blood. Some villagers died in harness [carrying the ti leaf bound wood on their backs], crumbling motionless on the trails; others, less fortunate, turned into living skeletons, weak from the effects of exhaustion, disease, malnutrition, and exposure to the chilly mountain winds without much clothing. To make things worse, the cutting was done at night with the help of sandalwood torches."

For many years it was widely assumed that the sandalwood trees had become extinct (disappeared) due to the harvesting that had occurred for more than 50 years

The impacts on nature for removing the sandalwood plants and the start of trade in Hawaii are many.

"Damage to the forest because of the trade..."

"Damage to the native forest by cattle left by the traders to re-supply their ships"

"Alien invasive species of plants and animals that kill of the native species of plants and animals were introduced into Hawaii"

"The introduction of rats and mice that left the ships caused a lot of damage because these animals eat the seeds of plants causing many other native plants to die out.

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Fur traders looking for other goods (things to sell) for the Canton market started the sandalwood trade. Chinese used the fragrant wood for incense, medicinal purposes, for architectural details and carved objects. Hawaiians used the wood they called 'iliahi; seven species grew in the Islands. While trade in Hawaiian sandalwood began as early as the 1790s, it didn't take off until fur prices began to drop around 1810.

In 1811, an agreement between Boston ship captains and Kamehameha established a monopoly (he owned all of the sandalwood) on sandalwood with Kamehameha receiving 25% of the profits. While a few individual chiefs also dealt directly with traders, it was not until the death of Kamehameha that a wholesale destruction of sandalwood forests took place. While Kamehameha still controlled the sandalwood, he placed a kapu on young trees to give them a chance to grow into bigger trees.

As trade and shipping brought Hawai'i into contact with a wider world, it also enabled the Hawaiians to buy and use Western goods, including arms (weapons) and ammunition. Kamehameha used Western cannon and guns to great advantage in his unification of the Islands and also acquired Western-style ships, buying the brig *Columbia* for a price of two ship loads of sandalwood in 1817.

After Kamehameha's death, his son Kamehameha II (Liholiho) fell into debt with sandalwood traders. Having given away his own lands, he relied on the wood supplies of others, but he was unable to stop other chiefs from making their own trade deals. By 1826, American traders were complaining about the debts owed by the king and chiefs and a general tax was imposed to pay off some of their collective debt. Traders played off the rivalry among chiefs to get the best price, ultimately killing all of the sandalwood in Hawaii's forests. The wood was sold by weight using a measure called a picul (133 1/3 pounds or about what a strong man could carry on his back). Traders made a profit of three to four dollars on each picul they bought in Hawai'i (at \$7-\$10) and then sold in Canton China. As logging continued sandalwood was harder to find so the Hawaiians set fire to areas of forest to find trees by their sweet scent while being burned. While mature trees could withstand the fire, the flames wiped out new seedlings (baby trees).

By 1830, the trade in sandalwood had completely collapsed. Hawaiian forests had no sandalwood left. Although forests were ravaged, a few sandalwood trees still survive today, tucked away on less accessible mountain slopes.

Impacts of Trade on Hawaii

Kamehameha looked upon these Americans and English as his servants, and he did not realize that they wanted something in return. They had not only brought weapons which gave Kamehameha his victories, and which had helped reduce the populations of the islands at a steady rate. They had brought in rum, which wrecked the health of thousands more, including the king's own family. Besides, they were beginning to find their own use for the islands. The old dreams in European minds about Polynesia had faded away long before, for there was no gold but there were even more valuable things. In the seas swarmed the great whales, with ivory in their jaws and layers of oil-giving blubber under their skins. On the hillsides grew forests of the sandalwood trees the Chinese used for incense. More and more often the white men's ships went between Europe and America and China, carrying tea, furs, ivory, whalebone, and oil. More and more often they stopped at the islands for food, water, and sandalwood. They paid with more guns, and more rum. Worse, they gave the diseases of their sailors - smallpox and tuberculosis - to the Hawaiian people who had never experienced them, and died quickly--like flies--when they caught them.

In Hawaii itself the sandalwood trade alone caused devastation, since the nobles forced the people to neglect their crops in order to cut the precious trees. At last, the king himself realized what was happening, and did what he could to repair the damage. Kamehameha set the example of a true Polynesian chief by putting a *Kapu* on the young trees, and planting fields with his own hands. He himself gave up drinking rum. But the world went on changing all the time, and the fate of his country was no longer in Kamehameha's hands.