

# Chamorro healers save medicinal plants

Chloe B Babauta , Pacific Daily News 9:42 p.m. ChST October 26, 2016



<http://www.guampdn.com/videos/news/2016/10/26/92760810/>

Suruhanus, or traditional Chamorro healers, and their apprentices, were invited to the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station to search for and harvest plants that can be used for food or medicinal purposes. Rick Cruz & Chloe Babauta/PDN



(Photo: Rick Cruz/PDN)

#### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

**NCTS access: Dave Snyder, 355-2013**

**Plant identification workshop: Adrienne Loerzel, 300-8580**

Suruhana Bernice Nelson and apprentices visited the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station wilderness Wednesday to collect plants for traditional Chamorro medicine.

Marine Corps Activity Guam invited Chamorro traditional healers, or suruhanu and suruhana, to harvest medicinal plants and collect species for transplantation.

Access program coordinator Dave Snyder, from the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, said the opportunity for plant transplantation is a long-term planning measure to save species for future use. The transplantations are conducted in preparation for the impending military buildup, when Marines will be transported from Okinawa to Guam.



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## Buildup groundbreaking after January 2017

Snyder said there's no set date for development, but eventually the NCTS vegetation area will be destroyed. As a mediation measure, the military enacted the Pragmatic Agreement in 2011 to allow access to certain cultural sites for Chamorro traditional master healers and carvers to harvest plants. Snyder said any time the military sets up a base, suruhanu and master carvers are notified. Before World War II, Chamorros relied on traditional herbal medicine instead of Western medicine. Nelson said many of Guam's plants can be used to treat common ailments, such as diabetes, cancer and dementia. Her focus at her nonprofit Amot Farm Inc. is cultivating local medicinal plants, researching their effects and educating Chamorros.

Nelson attended the harvesting to gather plants such as beach gardenia, or panao in Chamorro, for research. The panao flower also can be added to oil to create a fragrant natural perfume.

## Traditional Chamorro healers invited on base

Fullscreen

Pa'a Taotao Tano' member Zina Ruiz, right, smiles after she and others are successful in harvesting a plant from within the jungles of the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Nov. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN

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Pa'a Taotao Tano' member Zina Ruiz, right, smiles after she and others are successful in harvesting a plant from within the jungles of the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Nov. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



## **Traditional Chamorro healers invited on base**

Bernice Nelson, Amot Taotao Tano owner, looks over a fern-like plant growing out from the side of a tree at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



## **Traditional Chamorro healers invited on base**

Naval Facilities Command biologist Christiana Quinata, right, checks a plant for possible harvesting at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Naval Facilities Command biologist Christiana Quinata, right, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Coral Management Liason Adrienne Loerzel coordinate their efforts as they cut a branch from a tree at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Bernice Nelson, Amot Taotao Tano owner, talks about the beach gardenia, or "panao," in Chamorro, which was collected at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday. Its oil can be used in perfume, she said, but she needs to do more research about medicinal uses. Rick Cruz/PDN





Dave Snyder, center, Naval Facilities Command access program coordinator, briefs Marines and others prior to an excursion at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Dave Snyder, left, Naval Facilities Command access program coordinator, briefs Marines and others prior to an excursion at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



The fruit of a noni tree could be seen along a trail at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Master of Chamorro Dance Frank Rabon peers into the foliage for medicinal plants at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN

## Authorization

Before accessing the naval base, a suruhanu and suruhana must register to become authorized visitors and undergo a background check. Authorized visitors attend mandatory safety training to identify unexploded ordnance, and identification and risk mitigation to endangered and protected species. Ten people are authorized to visit the base for plant collection so far. Snyder encourages any interested healers to apply. Snyder said they have a friendly, cooperative relationship with suruhanu and are trying to conduct more visits throughout the year.

Master Chamorro dancer Francisco “Frank” Rabon, who was taught to identify and collect healing plants as a child, said there are different times of the year when plants should be harvested for optimum medicinal usage.



Naval Facilities Command biologist Christiana Quinata peers into the jungle for a plant worthy of harvesting at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Master of Chamorro Dance Frank Rabon looks up into the trees for medicinal plants at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Local suruhanus, or Chamorro traditional healers, federal officials and others, walk along a trail collecting plant clippings for medicinal purposes while at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayen, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN



Master of Chamorro Dance Frank Rabon prepares to photograph a medicinal plant at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayan, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rabon plans to share the image and information of the plant to students interested in learning about traditional Chamorro healing methods. Rick Cruz/PDN





Local suruhanus, or Chamorro traditional healers, federal officials and others, walk along a trail collecting plant clippings for medicinal purposes while at the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station in Finegayen, Dededo on Wednesday, Oct. 26. Rick Cruz/PDN

Rabon said the NCTS area is perfect for collecting plants because they grow undisturbed.

## Passing on culture

Rabon visited the plant site to learn the scientific names of plants to connect with his knowledge of the Chamorro names and their curative purposes. He said he wants to take his mastery, and photos, of plants to teach his students, so they can pass the knowledge to future generations. Rabon has educated Chamorro youths about culture for the past 33 years.

Making Chamorro medicine isn't as simple as cutting and boiling the plants, Rabon said. The title of suruhanu requires a complex knowledge of whether plants should be picked only at sunrise, within the hours of four to five in the afternoon, or at other specific times, which affects the restorative potency of the plants.

"This is the intricacy of being a suruhanu," Rabon said.

Nelson's Amot Farm also seeks to teach Chamorro youths about the medicinal plants.

"You don't just go make the medicine, it takes a lot of prayer," Nelson said.

The suruhana uses Catholic prayers such as "Hail Mary" over her mixtures, but said healers can use any prayers they want, as long as it comes from their heart. She compared the medicine preparation process to cooking food with love for one's family.

"You want it to taste good for them, so you add the special ingredient of love."



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## Reef protection

Coral management liaison Adrienne Loerzel, from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, also attended the harvesting for her work in the

Office for Coastal Management. Loerzel is working to propagate plants around Guam in an effort to create healthier forests and upland areas.

Some parts of southern Guam don't have much vegetation, so soil easily runs off hillsides and into the ocean, where it smothers the coral reef. Loerzel gathers plants to sow around the island, as well as educate the public on Guam's plants so they can help propagate them. Loerzel invites the public to attend a plant identification workshop at the Department of Agriculture on Nov. 12 to help protect Guam's coral reef.

### **LEARN MORE**

- For more information on the plant identification workshop at the Department of Agriculture, contact Adrienne Loerzel at 300-8580.
- To gain access to NCTS for cultural plant harvesting, contact Dave Snyder at 355-2013.