



Encyclopedia of Life

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Delal a kar Podcast and “Meet the Scientist” *Phaleria nisidai*

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel.

This is a story of a dangerous collision between two worlds – in a particular place and inside a particular person. And how, after that collision, those two worlds might just rescue one another.

The place is Palau – a country in the western tropical Pacific, near the Philippines. It's made up of over 700 little islands. And the person is Christopher Kitalong.

Kitalong: My father's from Palau. And my mom's from New Jersey.

Ari: Kitalong is well muscled and easy to be around. He grew up primarily in Palau – the backdrop for some of his earliest memories.

Kitalong: Most of my free time was spent, like, feeling the mud between your toes while racing through the mangrove forests, or climbing 80-foot trees, and knowing which tree you were jumping on so you knew it wasn't poisonous.

Ari: It was Kitalong's family that helped him discover the details of his natural surroundings.

Kitalong: My father, my grandmother, my uncles showed us, just, the beauty of what was around us.

Ari: This notion of honoring what the land has to give – in terms of food and shelter, it took root in Kitalong... and it's become more and more important to him as he's watched this tradition... erode.

Kitalong: It's a very rapid change from when my father was born to when I was born. So we're totally pushed towards this society where you have to become a businessman or a doctor. But it doesn't stress the value of our identity as people, and what is around us.

Ari: And it's this concern that's given Kitalong a mission – to help his fellow Palauans find a way to embrace modern life and their traditional culture at the same time.

It's no easy task, but Kitalong has an unexpected partner at his side – a plant that goes by the scientific name Phaleria nisidai.

Kitalong: We're looking in the family Thymelaeaceae.

Ari: Kitalong pulls a few dried specimens out of a cabinet at the Belau National Museum – stems of elongated leaves glued to pieces of paper. The samples come from trees that are 8 to 10 feet tall – trees that have been planted everywhere in Palau.

Kitalong: It was in our yard.

Ari: It's in the yards of Kitalong's relatives, his neighbors and his friends. But nobody eats the plant. Nor is it particularly decorative.

Kitalong: You couldn't climb it either. So as a child, I was like, "Well, what's the use of this tree?"

Ari: It turns out the answer to that question has to do with this plant's other name in Palau:

Kitalong: Delal a kar. And that means "mother of medicine." Just like the mother to a child, it took care of the Palauans.

Ari: Historically, delal a kar has been used as an energy booster and as the base in a variety of traditional medicines. Even now, as Palauans age, they often drink a tea made from the leaves of the plant. And Kitalong thinks delal a kar may continue to help his people, this time in the face of a modern medical foe – diabetes.

Two worlds – one being Palau and the other being the West, in the form of processed foods and a more sedentary lifestyle – have crashed into each other, and the result is a surge in diabetes in this part of the world.

Kitalong: It's been declared a national emergency. So this is something that is an immediate threat to our lives.

Ari: There's some preliminary evidence, though, that delal a kar – this mother of all medicines – may actually help fight diabetes. And Kitalong, who's a PhD student at CUNY and the New

York Botanical Garden, is currently organizing a clinical trial – a double blind, placebo-controlled Western clinical trial – in Palau to test it.

Balick: Chris' work is really path breaking in Palau.

Ari: This is Kitalong's PhD advisor – Michael Balick, an ethnobotanist at the New York Botanical Garden. And he says that by demonstrating the medical importance of a plant like delal a kar, Kitalong is helping rebuild respect among Palauans for their environment.

Balick: Going back to ancient ways – knowing in this forest what you can eat, how you can heal your wounds – gives a culture a greater sense of self-reliance and pride. And that is the antecedent to conservation.

Ari: Christopher Kitalong still has to run his clinical trial. And it's not clear how responsive Palauans will be to his case of fusing old and new. But when I was in Palau, I saw Kitalong not just in the lab, but out in the community too. He relates easily to people. He speaks two languages – the language of western science and the language of traditional remedy. And he's using his bilingual ability not just to prove the efficacy of delal a kar, or to conserve the land, but to reconnect Palauans with their roots.

Kitalong: You know, maybe, maybe taking a step back is the best way to move forward in health, and happiness...by promoting the fact that traditional remedies in Palau are valid. And that our culture and our knowledge from before is important to preserve.

Ari: Kitalong is a product of the same two worlds that have collided on Palau. He's found a way to merge them inside himself, and he's hoping he can help this tiny island nation do the same.

We've got some photos of Christopher Kitalong and his photosynthetic sidekick up on our website, eol.org.

Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel.

Meet the Scientist

Meet Christopher Kitalong, the scientist featured in the Del la kar podcast.

Chris is project manager for The Environment Inc, located in Koror, Palau. He is also affiliated with the Belau National Museum, the New York Botanical Gardens' Institute of Economic Botany, the Ministry of Health, Republic of Palau, the Belau Medical Clinic, and is a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center (CUNY).



What do you study?

My research extends from Field work to the Pharmacy, in an attempt to conserve and validate traditional practices through scientific methods.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

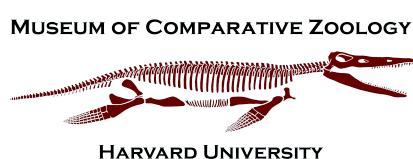
Scientific Researcher, Environmentalist, Proponent of Culture, Health and Education for the betterment of society.

What do you like to do when you are not in your lab?

I spend time with family and friends, travel and fish.

What do you like most about science?

I enjoy the fact that the research we are doing benefits health, preservation of culture and environment and at the same time provides new information for the scientific community. I think it also promotes the field of science for younger generations and teaches them the scientific value of the knowledge possessed by their parents and grandparents.



The One Species at a Time podcast series is supported by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.