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The Land that Feeds: Bringing the land back to the people in Hawaiian conservation

In a cool cloud forest thousands of feet above sea level, birdsong echoes between eucalyptus trees and mamane. Walk into the mist, tripping over mats of intertwined roots, and find a lush river gorge, where ‘ohi’a lehua fills the gaps and birds flicker like fairies between them. The vivid i’iwi, the scarlet ‘apapane, and the plump ‘alauahio, all dart overhead, flying as freely as if this place was made for them. The clouds drip full water drops onto raincoats, but there is no thunder—only the call of the honeycreepers. This is wao akua, the realm of the gods.

It is also Haleakalā National Park, established by the United States federal government in 1961. The park is home to many endangered species such as the honeycreepers and the silversword plant, and it is a unique location to observe outer space, seismic activities, and even microorganisms. Haleakalā is irreplaceable, so one might say it is a good thing that the park is protected by the American federal government. Indeed, the nēnē, once extinct outside of captivity, has made a comeback in the park thanks to the efforts of Boy Scouts of America.¹

My parents taught me to love birds, for their power of flight, their songs, their colors and patterns. I grew up seeing bald eagles become more and more common in the bays of Virginia and over the rivers of Indiana. My dad told me that when he was born, bald eagles were almost entirely extinct, and their comeback has been like a miracle of conservation. So, I’m glad Hawaiian honeycreepers are protected by the forces that would destroy their habitats and introduce diseases, but I have learned there is so much more to conservation than just keeping an

¹ “Nene Reintroduction.”

endangered species alive. When haole began to buy up land for ranches and when more land was appropriated by the illegal haole government, the ‘āina began to be severed from Hawaiians who had lived there for generations. Haleakalā being strictly regulated has not restored the people to the land, and both the people and the land have continued to suffer for it. The pattern holds true for countless other wahi pana in Hawai’i.

During this program, I have met many Native Hawaiians who approach protecting the land with the people in mind, which benefits both the lāhui and the ‘āina. I have identified three major ways in which Native Hawaiian conservation is revitalizing both the land and Hawaiian culture; first, history is extremely important to the modern understanding and research of the land, including pre- and post-contact human activity and the mo’olelo that date to before humans existed on the islands. Second, Kānaka Maoli conservationists view the land and sea not just as a thing to be kept off limits, but an opportunity to practice traditional land use strategies and envision a sustainable future for local communities. Finally, Native Hawaiian conservationists work with the sanctity of the ‘āina in mind, such as performing protocol and being mindful and protective of iwi kupuna (human remains).

For this paper, I rely on the work and insights of Kānaka we have met during our program to investigate the legacy of colonialism in American conservation work. This paper is in no way a comprehensive report on how Kānaka Maoli are engaging with conservation in a colonial system— I have only begun to scratch the surface on the topic of Hawaiian conservation— but rather a few profiles of groups and individuals that are working with the system in different ways. I interviewed the following individuals: Scott Fisher (Hawai’i Land Trust), Ekolu Lindsey (Polanui Hiu and Maui Cultural Lands), and Kylee Pomaikai Mar (Protect Kaho’olawe ‘Ohana). I also consulted Denby Freeland (Hawai’i Land Trust) and Steven Baptiste (Humble Tours) over

email. Further information for this paper comes from talk story sessions with the following individuals: Dean Wilhelm (Ho'okua'āina), Kia'i Collier (Hawai'i Land Trust), Ua Aloha Maji (Kipuka Olowalu), and Duane Sparkman (Kipuka Olowalu).

History and genealogy in the land

Looking northward in Waihe'e Refuge, I can see a verdant valley beneath magnificent windswept dunes, backed by steeply-climbing forested mountains. Within my field of vision lies thousands of years of Hawaiian history, written in the land itself. According to mo'olelo, the earliest landing at Waihe'e was made by Haumea, goddess of childbirth, who brought with her the sacred tree kalaukekahuli, the "tree of changing leaves."² To create shelter for this sacred tree, Haumea created the sand dunes now known as Mauna Ihi. Waihe'e has also been the setting for stories for other Hawaiian akua including Kane, Kanaloa, and Maui, the island's namesake himself. Since ancient times, the landscape of Waihe'e has changed a great deal; the kalaukekahuli no longer stand in the valley, and new parents do not ask the mo'o goddess in Eleile Pond permission to put their baby's umbilical cord in the water. But it is significant that these mo'olelo survive at all. For many Kānaka Maoli, the physical severance from the land meant being cut off from their histories, since the stories resided in physical locations, the place names, and most importantly, in the living memory of kupuna that lived there.

Before European contact, there was no written system for Hawaiian and therefore no written records for the first couple of millennia of Hawaiian history. This does not, however, mean they do not have a history. In the past, certain Western scholars have dismissed indigenous oral history like mo'olelo as insufficient proof when it comes to ancestry and traditional land use.

² Fisher, "Na Mea 'Āwe'awe'a I Ka 'Āina: The Faint Traces On The Land."

Professor Jocelyn Linnekin published literature in the 1980's that argued Hawaiians had invented their contemporary culture to suit their efforts to reclaim wahi pana from the U.S. government.³ Haunani-Kay Trask took issue with this argument on the grounds that Linnekin was disrespecting the validity and significance of mo'olelo.⁴

Kānaka Maoli scholars and professionals have combatted this dismissal of mo'olelo by doubling down on efforts to collect and share them, and that work begins in the 'āina. At Nu'u Refuge on Maui's south shore, Scott Fisher led us on a trip through history that spanned hundreds of years. On basalt columns bordering the historic village of Kaupō, there are petroglyphs, including what archaeologists call the "birdman." A mo'olelo recorded by a white anthropologist in 1915 tells of a legendary warrior named Namaka who could "fly over mountains and streams and precipices and plains and not be killed."⁵ In the 1920's, anthropologists⁶ from the Bishop Museum interviewed an elder named Kekai to try to ascertain the age of these petroglyphs. Kekai remembered that when he was young, the petroglyphs were already old, which allowed the anthropologists to date the petroglyphs to at least shortly before European contact.⁷ Without Kekai, they would have had no way of knowing the age of those petroglyphs. Without kupuna, information about a place and all its lessons is lost.

Scott Fisher has a reputation among his friends and colleagues for possessing an incredible amount of knowledge, both about the ecology of Hawai'i and about the lives of historic Hawaiians. He applies his understanding of the past towards protecting the fragile ecology of Nu'u, such as constructing a "bioshield" of native trees to prevent a tsunami from

³ Linnekin 1983.

⁴ Trask 1999, 128.

⁵ Westervelt 1915, 121-127.

⁶ Gregoire.

⁷ Interview with Scott Fisher.

inundating the land as it did in 1946. As a Kanaka Maoli who grew up around Kaupō,⁸ so too does he honor the genealogy of Hawaiians who are descendents of the land. As part of his work on the Burial Council, he told me he regularly engages with cultural and lineal descendents⁹ of areas of land that are being slated for development. By involving descendents in the decision-making process, the Burial Council ensures that mo'olelo and family histories are honored. Bit by bit, this work restores agency of ancestral land to the lāhui, and validates a Hawaiian way of knowing the past in the context of conservation.

Sustainable futures in ancient pasts

David Treuer recently wrote an article that argued the national parks should be returned to the stewardship of Native Americans, for more reasons than can be counted in this paper. One of his points stood out to me as similar to subsistence practices in Hawai'i:

“For a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, buying a bison burger at Whole Foods might satisfy their caloric needs, but being able to hunt and harvest bison, in keeping with their spiritual and cultural practices, feeds their culture and community. Native life was diminished when our land disappeared beneath our feet, and it is further diminished when the manner in which we access ‘public’ lands is scripted by the government.”¹⁰

When I asked Ekolū Lindsey about his thoughts about the Native Hawaiian approach to conservation, it gave him pause. He told me he hadn't thought about his work as “conservation,” since to him the term evokes closing off a natural space and not allowing anyone in. On the

⁸ Edwards 2012.

⁹ In this case, a cultural descendent refers to someone whose ancestors lived in a certain area, whereas a lineal descendent is someone whose genealogy can be directly traced to a specific historic individual.

¹⁰ Treuer 2021.

contrary, Ekolu's method of conservation relies on the deep involvement of the community. The community project Polanui Hiu aims to both restore the reef Nā Papalimu O Pi'ilani to full health as well as to revitalize traditional Hawaiian subsistence fishing practices. In the not-too-recent past, before Lahaina was so extensively developed into a resort and time-share paradise, Hawaiian fishermen caught plentiful fish in the channel. It surprised me to hear that the fishermen even had a partnership with giant barracudas in the reef, who herded the schools of fish into the nets in return for a portion of the catch. When the coral heads grew together on the way out to the channel, blocking currents and the path for canoes, someone would take an 'ō'ō and break up the coral.

Needless to say, Native Hawaiians no longer have that sort of free rein over land and ocean management. The bureaucratic system is so slow and cautious as to be almost counterproductive; Ekolu noticed tourists kayaking through the reef and damaging coral heads in front of his house, and decided buoys needed to be put in to guide the kayakers through. To get official approval and funding for such a step would have required expensive surveys and certifications. The American government once took far too much from the Hawaiian land and sea, causing massive habitat destruction and other ramifications that last to this day. Now, in some ways the pendulum has swung a little too far in the other direction; though the system ostensibly prevents any malinformed activity in the fragile reef, it can be an obstacle to taking action to protect the reef from an immediate threat.

Polanui Hiu is a project designed to create a sustainable fishing environment for the community, based on the knowledge and study of the reef itself. The Department of Land and Natural Resources is able to grant a, Community-based Subsistence Fishing Area designation, a special status which allows a community to set environmental regulations and monitoring

strategies to help their part of the ocean to thrive.¹¹ In Nā Papalimu O Pi'ilani, Ekolu sees unregulated activities every day that damage the reef: kayakers hitting coral heads, residents draining their chlorinated pools into the ocean, and landscaping that weakens the root structures that need to prevent erosion.¹² Polanui Hiu applied for a CBSFA designation in 2016, proposing a ho'omalū (no-take) period of five years to allow the populations of dwindling reef fish to replenish.¹³ Their application was denied by the Division of Aquatic Resources in part because there was not already a large community of fishermen in the area who felt they were in the economic position to go into subsistence fishing.¹⁴ Hawai'i is an expensive place to live, after all, in large part because property prices are inflated by wealthy haole vacationers.¹⁵ The DAR did, however, express support of "Polanui Hiu's continuation of its community-based management activities."¹⁶ At the time, they also offered to discuss other approaches to regulating activity in the reef, but Nā Papalimu O Pi'ilani remains vulnerable to polluted runoff, tourist activities, and the influx of plastic waste.

To catch fish and gather limu as ancestors once did is both an environmentally-conscious practice and one that keeps heritage alive. Polanui Hiu is not alone in revitalizing traditional subsistence practices—on O'ahu, Ho'okua'āina is a not-for-profit organization that grows kalo to feed the community and build a stronger, more supportive community. One of their programs works with adolescent boys from difficult home circumstances, who Uncle Dean Wilhelm says benefit from being encouraged to do good work and reap the rewards.¹⁷ Protect Kaho'olawe

¹¹ Division of Aquatic Resources 2014.

¹² Lindsey 2022.

¹³ Lindsey 2016.

¹⁴ Division of Aquatic Resources 2016.

¹⁵ HNN Staff 2021.

¹⁶ Division of Aquatic Resources 2016.

¹⁷ Wilhelm 2022.

‘Ohana’s “I Ola Kanaloa” 12-year plan includes beginning to cultivate food on the island again, although they “must take care to not deplete resources from the land and waters.”¹⁸ The stages of the plan are named after the growth stages of a plant (kupu, lau, and so on), echoing ancient knowledge about the needs of a growing organism and what should be done at what time. Informed decisions about what to do with recovering land and ocean is extremely important in conservation, and Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners have a wealth of knowledge to lead the best path to a sustainable future.

Sacred knowledge, sacred spaces

Before we entered Waihe’e, Waiakeakua, and Olowalu, we were given an ‘oli kahea, a chant of welcome to allow us into the space. I took off my hat as was proper, so that the ancestors could see the crown of my head, the piko that connects people to their ‘aumākuā.¹⁹ Though my ancestors did not belong to this land, the kumu leading us into the special space wanted their ancestors to know us and accept us in. When we approached a wahi pana, a sacred site, there was additional protocol; Kia’i performed another ‘oli near to the heiau at Waihe’e before we approached, which he said was both to acknowledge the sanctity of the space and also protect us from any negative energy that might be around.

The Hawaiian religion is an animistic belief system that recognizes sacredness in all things on a great continuum.²⁰ While some places contain more mana than others (wahi pana), everything and everyone has some level of spiritual power that must be recognized and honored. This is all the more true if there are any iwi kupuna in the area. The Abrahamic religious

¹⁸ Protect Kaho’olawe ‘Ohana 2015, 16.

¹⁹ Wight 2015, 10.

²⁰ Maji 2022.

traditions pose a stark contrast, honoring particular people and places, limiting spiritual power to finite things. When ranchers, developers, and plantations bought up land in Hawai'i, the land ceased to be recognized as sacred by its caretakers. Heiau fell into disrepair or were destroyed entirely; plants used for lā'au lapa'au were killed off by RoundUp and harsh chemicals; and iwi kupuna were removed from their resting places. And, importantly, kumu lost access to their wahi pana. One of our program partners asked us to think of how Christians and Jewish people see Israel; all of Hawai'i is sacred in that way to Native Hawaiians, but haole landowners have rarely acknowledged that.

In spaces controlled by the state or federal government, Kānaka Maoli still fight to protect the sacred land; though Mauna Kea is ostensibly protected as one of Hawai'i's conservation areas,²¹ over a dozen telescopes have already been built on the sacred mauna and the Thirty Meter Telescope is still being fervently resisted by the kia'i of Mauna Kea.²² There is much greater agency for Native Hawaiians working with non-governmental land trusts like HILT and Maui Cultural Lands to protect wahi pana and connect with the mana of the land. On many trust properties like Olowalu and Waihe'e, kumu have resumed caring for the spiritually sensitive wahi pana and providing people with guidance in their work. At Waihe'e, in just the last year an 'oli kahea was composed, an ahu consecrated, and a master builder engaged to reconstruct the heiau and commence worship.²³ Land managed by Hawaiian conservationists has become ideal places for building hula platforms, holding training for kumu, and raising native plants for lā'au lapa'au.

²¹“Legal Protections.” *Kahea: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance*.

²²“About the Mauna Kea Syllabus Project.” *The Mauna Kea Syllabus*.

²³ Interview with Scott Fisher.

Kaho'olawe remains physically decimated from decades of military and agricultural abuse, but it is clear the mana has never been cut off. Before someone lands on the island, one must chant an 'oli and wait for the response welcoming the visitor onto the shore. The landing on Kaho'olawe represents the end of the voyage from Tahiti, the 'oli harkening back to the ancient voyagers who were welcomed home to the Hawaiian Islands after their long journey.²⁴ Kylee Pomaikai Mar described that the power of Kaho'olawe is palpable— if a visitor isn't careful, the tentacle of Kanaloa will wrap itself around their heart and irresistibly pull them back to the island. To prevent this, before leaving the island a cultural practitioner must perform Ke Noi 'A'ama to distract the octopus kinolau of Kanaloa with an 'a'ama (crab).²⁵ In conservation work such as that on Kaho'olawe, where Native Hawaiians are the main decision-makers, Kanaka Maoli are able to honor the mana in the entirety of the landscape and have a great deal more freedom to care for wahi pana and benefit from the spiritual energy they give.

Conclusion

Northwest of the major Hawaiian islands, ten islands and atolls comprise Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. In 2015, Ekolu Lindsey voyaged to one of those ten islands, Nihoa, to perform wildlife surveys with the Nature Conservancy.²⁶ There, he observed albatross parents feeding their chicks with mouthfuls of sea detritus including plastic nurdles. The chicks die of starvation with their stomachs full of plastic. It's hard to imagine a situation more emblematic of the need for conservation, and clearly the current "protected" designation for the northwestern islands is not enough in and of itself to truly protect the

²⁴ Interview with Kylee Pomaikai Mar.

²⁵ "Chants for Kaho'olawe."

²⁶ Schual.

threatened albatrosses. During our weeks in Hawai'i, I have learned that the answer to an ecological crisis is not to set a natural space aside and turn away from it; after all, trash from thousands of miles away still makes its way to Nihoa and poisons living things. The people we have met on this program have taught me that humans do not need to be separate from the land in order to take care of it; in fact, they should be deeply *connected* to the land in order to take care of it.

Kylee Pomaikai Mar told me that while Kaho'olawe has sustained the worst kind of damage that human beings can do, work on the island has also demonstrated the power of human beings to change their homes and communities for the better. Though there is still much work to be done on the island, Kylee says that the lahui and Kaho'olawe have a symbiotic relationship—thriving together, helping each other heal. Kaho'olawe is a beacon of hope for what the future of the 'āina can look like as Native Hawaiians continue to conserve their history, traditional malama of the land, and wahi pana. Just as anthropology is in the process of becoming decolonized,²⁷ so is conservation. The work of Native Hawaiian conservationists and cultural practitioners is vital to forming conservation into something good for the people as it is good for the Earth.

Glossary of Hawaiian words

'āina: the land; encompasses the physical land itself, the Hawaiian nation

akua: god

'aumakua: ancestral god

haole: literally “foreigner,” usually refers to white people

iwi kupuna: human remains

²⁷ White and Tengan 2001.

kalo: taro, a staple in the Hawaiian diet; the elder sibling of the Hawaiian people

Kanaka Maoli: Native Hawaiian

kia'i: guardian

kinolau: body form of an akua

kumu: teacher, master, spiritual leader

kupu: germination²⁸

kupuna: wise elder

lā'au lapa'au: traditional Hawaiian medicine

lāhui: the Hawaiian people as a whole

lau: leaf

limu: ocean algae, seaweed, seagrass

mālama: stewardship

mana: spiritual power

mauna: mountain, peak

mo'o: lizard, dragon, genealogy

mo'olelo: a narrative story

‘ō'ō: a digging stick

piko: “center”

wahi pana: a sacred space, such as a heiau, burial, or ahu

wao akua: realm of the gods, the cloud forest where mortal people were only allowed for special purposes

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²⁸ Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana 2015, 22.

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