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Hawaiian Cultural and Natural Resource Management

*‘E malama pono i ka ‘aina;
nana mai ke ola.
Take good care of the land;
it grants you life.”*

—Aunty Edith Kanakaole,
scholar and kumu hula

Important to the perpetuation of traditional Hawaiian methods of cultural and natural resource management are the isolated and largely undeveloped rural communities, many of which have historically been bypassed by the mainstream of social and economic development. Throughout the islands of Hawai‘i, these rural subsistence communities have continued, from generation to generation, to practice cultivation, gathering, fishing, and hunting for survival in accordance with the ‘ohana (extended family) values and responsibilities taught to them by their ancestors. It is in these areas that the natural resources, which have sustained this traditional lifestyle, have in turn been maintained through the cultural practices or ideas of *aloha ‘aina/kai* (cherish the land and ocean) and *malama ‘aina/kai* (care for the land and ocean).

In studies conducted to document the traditional beliefs, customs and practices in the remaining handful of rural Hawaiian communities (in particular the islands of Moloka‘i and Kaho‘olawe, Ke‘anae and Wailuanui on Maui, Waiahole and Waikane, and Hakipu‘u on O‘ahu,

and the Puna district of Hawai‘i), it is evident that traditional resource management methods play an essential role to the perpetuation of native culture.

Overview

The quality and abundance of the natural resources in and surrounding rural Hawaiian communities can be attributed to the persistence of ‘ohana (extended family) values and practices in the conduct of subsistence activities. An inherent aspect of these ‘ohana values is the practice of conservation to ensure availability of natural resources for present and future generations. These rules of behavior are tied to cultural beliefs and values regarding respect of the ‘aina (the land), the virtue of sharing and not taking too much, and a holistic perspective of organisms and ecosystems that emphasizes balance and coexistence. The Hawaiian outlook which shapes these

Ke‘anae peninsula on Maui, where traditional Hawaiian subsistence practices are used as a form of natural resource management. Photo by Group 70, Inc.



customs and practices is *lokahi* or maintaining spiritual, cultural, and natural balance with the elemental life forces of nature.

In communities where traditional Hawaiian customs and practices have continued to be practiced, the ‘ohana respect and care for the surrounding natural resources. They only use and

take what is needed. They allow the natural resources to reproduce. They share what is gathered with family and neighbors. Through understanding the life cycle of the various natural resources, how changes in the moon phase and the wet and dry seasons affect the abundance and distribution of the resources, the subsistence practitioners are able to plan and adjust their activities and keep the resources healthy. Such knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through working side-by-side with their *kupuna* or elders.

This ancestral knowledge about the land and its resource is reinforced through continued subsistence practices. While traveling to the various *‘ili* of the traditional cultural practices region through dirt roads and trails, and along spring-fed streams, and the shoreline, practitioners continuously renew their cultural knowledge and understanding of the landscape, the place names, names of the winds and the rains, traditional legends, *wahi pana*, historical cultural sites, and the location of various native plants and animals. The practitioners stay alert to the condition of the landscape and the resources and their changes due to seasonal and life cycle transformations. This orientation is critical to the preservation of the natural and cultural landscape. The land is not a commodity to them. It is the foundation of their cultural and spiritual identity as Hawaiians. They proudly trace their lineage to the lands in the region as being originally settled by their ancestors. The land is a part of their *‘ohana* and they care for it as they do the other living members of their families.

Principles of Hawaiian Cultural Resource Management

There are certain basic principles which are useful in guiding the management of Hawaiian cultural resources.

First, the *ahupua`a* is the basic unit of Hawaiian cultural resource management. An *ahupua`a* runs from the sea to the mountains and contains a sea fishery and beach, a stretch of *kula* or open cultivable land and higher up, the forest.

The court of the Hawaiian Kingdom described the *ahupua`a* a principle of land-use in the case *In Re Boundaries of Pulehunui*, 4 Haw. 239, 241 (1879) as follows:

A principle very largely obtaining in these divisions of territory [ahupua`a] was that a land should run from the sea to the mountains, thus affording to the chief and his people a fishery residence at the warm seaside, together with products of the high lands, such as fuel, canoe timber, mountain birds, and the right of way to the same, and all the varied products of the intermediate as might be suitable to the soil and climate of the different altitudes from sea soil to mountainside or top.



Taro lo`i, where fresh water running from the mountains provides continual irrigation through the crops. Photo by Group 70, Inc.

Second, the natural elements—land, air, water, ocean—are interconnected and interdependent. The atmosphere affects the lands which, in turn, affects running streams, the water table, and the beaches and ocean. Cultural land-use management must take all aspects of the natural environment into account.

Third, of all the natural elements, fresh water is the most important for life and needs to be considered in every aspect of land-use and planning.

Fourth, Hawaiians' ancestors studied the land and the natural elements and became very familiar with its features and assets. Ancestral knowledge of the land was recorded and passed down through place names, chants which name the winds, rains, and features of a particular district, and legends. Hawaiians applied their expert

knowledge of the natural environment in constructing their homes, temples, cultivation and irrigation networks. Therefore, it is important to consult Hawaiian place names, chants, legends to learn of the cultural and natural resources of a particular district. Insights into the natural and cultural resources of a particular area can also be gained by studying the location and construction of traditional Hawaiian sites.

Sources of Information About Cultural Resources

For cultural resource management it is important to reconstruct the cultural history of a particular area in order to plan the management of its cultural and natural resources.

In the early-19th century, the four Lahainaluna Hawaiian scholars—David Malo, Samuel Kamakau, Kepelino, and John Papa Ii—each documented through oral histories, many facts of Hawaiian custom, belief, and practice. Explorers, artists, and missionaries added to the ethnography of Hawai'i in their journals, diaries, writings, and works of art. Government records and documents are in the Hawai'i State Archives. Of special importance are the Land Commission testimonies and records.

In the 20th century, Kahaulelio documented fishing traditions, custom, and practice. Mary Kawena Pukui collaborated with E.S. Craighill and Elizabeth Green Handy to document the customs and practices of Hawaiians in planting taro, sweet potato, banana, and other food crops. Cultural anthropologists and ethnographers Abraham Fomander, Peter Buck, Nathaniel Emerson, Kenneth Emory, Theodore Kelsey, Marion Kelly, and Dorothy Barrere have each written volumes of information documenting customs and practices unique to particular districts as well as those generally practiced throughout the islands. The *Hawai'i Ethnographic Notes* collection of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum and its audio recording collection of chants and oral history interviews has a wealth of information concerning Hawaiian custom, belief, and practice.

Traditionally, cultural knowledge was remembered and passed down through oral tradition in chants, legends, myths, genealogies, and place names. There is still a wealth of knowledge which is kept alive and practiced by living generations of Hawaiian families, and those who received traditional training such as *kumu hula* and *kahuna la'au lapa'au*. Moreover, the living culture is constantly undergoing growth and change. Therefore, any effort to understand and document the natural and cultural resources of an area must include consultation with the Hawaiian *'ohana*, *kumu*, and cultural groups who live in the

area, have use rights and take responsibility for the cultural and natural resources of the area.

Boundaries

There are two areas which comprise a cultural landscape—the core area and the broader traditional cultural practices area. The core area includes land-used for residence and cultivation. These include areas of taro cultivation, irrigation networks, and associated settlement and circulation systems.

The broader traditional cultural practices area usually coincides with the traditional *ahupua'a* and *moku*. It includes all of the zones needed to gather, hunt, and fish for subsistence, cultural, and religious purposes. In many cases, the areas used by *'ohana* for gathering, hunting, and fishing may have extended beyond the *ahupua'a* into other areas of the *moku* or district or another part of the island. One must rely upon the *'ohana* of the area who are subsistence practitioners to describe the boundaries of the traditional cultural practices area.

Landscape Components

A cultural landscape is composed of physical elements which manifest the technological and cultural basis of human use of the land through time.

The components of a Hawaiian cultural landscape include: areas of taro cultivation; other areas of cultivation; circulation networks; buildings, structures, non-structural facilities, and objects; clusters; internal boundaries; an irrigation ditch system, including roads and tunnels; archeological and historic sites; open areas; small-scale elements; viewing points; and cultural resources and use areas.

Of these components, I will expand on the cultural resources and use areas.

- ***Wahi Pana***. These are sacred sites such as *heiau*, shrines, burial caves and graves and geographic features associated with deities and significant natural, cultural, spiritual or historical phenomenon or events. Edward Kanahale offered the following description of *wahi pana* in the introduction to *Ancient Sites of O'ahu* by Van James (1991):

The gods and their disciples specified places that were sacred. The inventory of sacred places in Hawai'i includes the dwelling places of the gods, the dwelling places of venerable disciples, temples, and shrines, as well as selected observation points, cliffs, mounds, mountains, weather phenomena, forests, and volcanoes.

- ***Streams and Springs***. These waters are important as habitats for native species of

Taro lo'i. Photo by Group 70, Inc.



marine life, for taro cultivation, and for domestic uses.

- **Shorelines, Reefs, Nearshore and Offshore Ocean.** These areas are important for gathering of foods, medicine and for conducting cultural and spiritual customs.
- **Forests.** Forests are important for hunting pigs and other animals; for gathering plants used for medicine, foods, ceremonial adornment, ritual offerings; and for the conduct of spiritual customs.
- **Domains of `Aumakua or Ancestral Deities.** Particular natural and cultural areas are important as traditional domains of `aumakua or ancestral spirits and deities, where Hawaiians renew their ties to ancestors through experiencing natural phenomena and witnessing *ho`ailona* or natural signs.
- **Trails and Dirt Roads.** Trails and dirt roads are indispensable to afford access to the cultural resources and use areas, both *mauka* to forests and streams and *makai* to streams and the ocean.

Summary

All of the people living in Hawai'i today enjoy the rich cultural and natural resources which make Hawai'i a special place to live because of the persistence of Hawaiian `ohana values and practices. As we enter the 21st century it will become increasingly important for everyone to begin to adopt the Hawaiian way of loving and caring for the land. It is the responsibility of everyone who enjoys living in Hawai'i to protect the precious resources of the islands.

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