

Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A Name of Honor

Native Hawaiian culture is living—it is the expression of a people that continues to evolve in great part through the perpetuation of a rich, oral tradition. Genealogies are still spoken through oli (chant) and mele (song), as are histories, natural resource management knowledge, philosophies, and medicinal and spiritual knowledge.

The longest recorded traditional Hawaiian chant, the Kumulipo (Source of deep darkness), is the history of how all life forms came and evolved from Papahānaumokuākea, beginning with the coral polyp – the building block for all life. Thus, the genealogy of Papahānaumokuākea tells the story of Native Hawaiians’ ancestral connection with the gods who created those coral polyps, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands or Kūpuna (respected elders) Islands, and everything else in the archipelago, including Native Hawaiians.

The name Papahānaumokuākea (pronounced Pa-pa-hah-now-mo-koo-ah-keh-ah) comes from an ancient Hawaiian tradition concerning the genealogy and formation of the Hawaiian Islands, and a deep honoring of the dualisms of life. Papahānaumoku is a mother figure personified by the earth and Wākea is a father figure personified in the expansive sky; the two are honored and highly recognized ancestors of Native Hawaiian people. Their union resulted in the creation, or birthing, of the entire Hawaiian archipelago—thus the naming of the monument is to honor and preserve these names, to strengthen Hawaii’s cultural foundation and to ground Hawaiians to an important part of their history.

Taken apart, “Papa” (earth mother), “hānau” (birth), “moku” (small island or large land division), and “ākea” (wide) bespeak a fertile woman giving birth to a wide stretch of islands beneath a benevolent

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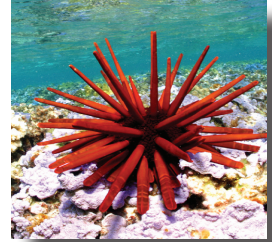


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sky. Taken as one long name, Papahānaumokuākea can be seen as a symbol of hope and regeneration for the Kūpuna Islands and the main Hawaiian Islands. And through the mana (spiritual power) of Papahānaumokuākea’s name, one that encourages abundance and the procreative forces of earth, sea, and sky, the Native Hawaiian people hope that the cultural, spiritual and physical health of their people will grow as well.

Sacred Landscapes

Papahānaumokuākea is considered a sacred area, from which Native Hawaiians believe all life springs, and to which spirits return to after death. There are many wahi pana (places of great cultural significance and practice), which, like a lei, are strung together throughout the expanse of the ten main atolls and islands. Papahānaumokuākea is also a place for Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners of today to reconnect with their ancestors and gods, who they believe are manifested in nature, as with the Polynesian deity Kanaloa, who they believe is embodied by the vast expansive ocean, and can take the form of all life within it.



Navigation

In recent years, Native Hawaiians, in their continuing journey to rediscover and perpetuate their traditional and customary practices, have voyaged to Papahānaumokuākea to honor their ancestors and to access their Kūpuna Islands, which are a deep well of knowledge and spiritual inspiration.

In 2004, the Polynesian voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a sailed more than 1,200 miles to the most distant end of the island chain to visit Kure Atoll as part of a statewide educational initiative called “Navigating Change.” The crew officially began their voyage into Papahānaumokuākea by performing cultural protocols at Nihoa. From there, they sailed up the chain paying their respects to each Kūpuna Island as they went. Along the way the crew also stopped to help remove invasive species and marine debris from various atolls and to document, for school children and the broader public, the health of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands.



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Present-day Ho‘okele (traditional, voyaging wayfinders/navigators) also use the passage to Nihoa as a navigational test. The Polynesian Voyaging Society began testing apprentice navigators by challenging them to sail to Nihoa from Lehua, a small, 700-foot-high, crescent-shaped island near Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau. Based on a navigational test that was probably used centuries ago, the route is ideal for a novice navigator to prove their skills in reading the celestial and ocean environments. Oral tradition tells that in fair weather, canoes would sail first from Kaua‘i to Lehua, which is known as a navigational “pointer” to Nihoa. To then find Nihoa, and subsequently Mokumanamana, would be a wayfinder’s goal. The islands themselves also have particular archaeological sites that appear to show evidence of being “navigation classrooms.” It is believed that these sites provided Hawaiian navigators direct communication with the elements and the gods who they believed were personified in those elements.

A Perpetual Legacy

Native Hawaiians believe they are descended from the same gods who birthed all life in the Hawaiian Archipelago. This connection and belief passes to each generation the kuleana (right and responsibility) to sustain their ancestral rights, and reminds Native Hawaiians of their role as sacred stewards to mālama (care for) the natural and cultural resources in Papahānaumokuākea.



Photo Credit: NOAA

For more information about Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, please visit:

www.papahanaumokuakea.gov