



NEWS RELEASE

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HAWAIIAN CULTURE, HAWAIIAN LAND In Maui Nui, the traditional way of life is rooted in the 'āina

MAUI, Hawai'i – When Polynesian voyagers first came to the Hawaiian islands, maybe as early as 300 AD, they found forested mountains, flitting birds, colorful snails, and insect life no one had ever seen before - from blossoming 'ōhi'a, and colorful honeycreepers to elusive butterflies, a dazzling diversity to behold. Fiery volcanic eruptions inspired awe, as did snowcapped summits, rushing streams, and offshore reefs teeming with wondrous fish. The first Hawaiians brought in their canoes a variety of plants that could provide food and medicine; they planted these alongside the endemic, existing species.

Over the years, an agricultural and highly developed society emerged interdependent with its surroundings, respectful of land and sea, economically self-sufficient. Isolated from the outside world and inseparably entwined, the Hawaiians spurred a living culture originating in the unique conditions of their environment. When Captain Cook “discovered” the Islands in 1778, he found a thriving native population living in sustainable harmony.

Today, traditional Hawaiian practices are proving to be the key to island living once more. The natural environment of Maui Nui and the communities that have made it their home seem to do best when merging with the cultural values of old-connectedness with the land has become the pulse of the sustainability the islands seek.

Sustainability in ancient Hawai'i centered around ahupua'a, traditional land divisions that stretched from the mountain to the ocean. Ahupua'a communities ('ohana) divided the labor and shared the food raised having access to fish from coastal waters and forest



resources alike. Careful resource management ensured that no species was ever depleted, and stream water never went to waste. Taro, a starchy corm often pounded in a paste called poi was the staff of life and the symbol of the community.

Several projects are under way that seek to restore traditional Hawaiian land use. In Kīpahulu, a rural, verdant district in east Maui, the nonprofit Kīpahulu ‘Ohana has established Kapahu Living Farm, a 2.5-acre plateau of restored taro patches interspersed with bananas, breadfruit, coconut, and sugar cane. In a partnership with Haleakalā National Park, it hosts daily cultural interpretative hikes filled with scenic beauty and hands-on cultural learning in muddy taro patches and amid powerful endemic plants.

With its astounding natural beauty, culminating in the pristine Mo‘o‘ula Falls, Hālawā Valley in East Moloka‘i once offered a perfect spot for early Polynesian settlement and became one of the islands’ great taro growing areas. The stream-rich valley sustained Hawaiian culture continuously until the 1960s. Today, members of the Hālawā Valley Cooperative have restored some of the lo‘i, and offer guided hikes to bring ancient history and traditional practices vibrantly alive for visitors. The valley is filled with archaeological sites. The two-tiered Mo‘o‘ula Falls drops 250 feet into a delightful pool where legend states that a giant lizard (mo‘o) lives. Before swimming, visitors are advised to drop a ti leaf into the water. If it floats, it is safe to swim. But if it sinks? The mo‘o is angry and will not welcome you.

Moku‘ula in Lāhaina promises to become one of the most significant, dynamic centers of living Hawaiian culture in Hawai‘i. The site once belonged to the most sacred places in the Islands. A lake island full of mythical, political and spiritual significance; it served as the capital of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i sustaining taro patches and fishponds for the chiefs. However, the site was ignored for years covered underneath a ball park. Today, restoration efforts overseen by the nonprofit Friends of Moku‘ula are underway. The project is funded in part by fascinating tours that share the history of this important place and its significance in modern Hawai‘i.

A National Tropical Botanical Garden in east Maui, containing the world’s largest collection of breadfruit tree varieties, Kahanu Garden, is home to a sacred heiau (temple). Also noteworthy is its “Canoe Garden,” a living collection of the plants used by the early Polynesians. The garden intends to transport people back in time and show them what a Hawaiian landscape would have looked like.

Native Hawaiians depended on the land but as much on the water, especially shoreline waters, where mountain streams met the sea. Vital to survival and deeply respected, water held important symbolism in chants and myths. At each level of its course, a fresh water stream served a purpose, until eventually spilling into brackish ponds close to the



sea: aquaculture was part of the Hawaiians' ingenious skills. In Kīhei, one such ancient fishpond has been restored through traditional Polynesian techniques. Kō'ie'ie Fishpond is believed to trace back to the earliest years of settlement – some 1500-plus years ago – a technological feat of expertly crafted stonework enclosing three acres of sea water ideal for breeding fish. It is said that before 'Ao'ao O Nā Loko I'a O Maui (Association of the Fishponds of Maui) began its preservation efforts, Kamehameha I was the last to restore the pond's walls. The initiative's slogan for the ongoing work? "Revitalize a wall... Revitalize a culture..."

Few other fishponds remain in Maui Nui, but similar restoration projects are taking place on Moloka'i, which boasts the largest reef system in the United States. As a result, it has the world's most spectacular collection of loko i'a or fish ponds. About 70 ponds stretch along the south shore and most of the ponds are currently hidden in mangrove thickets visible only from the air. One Ali'i Fishpond accepts visitor tours. The 27-acre restoration project engages local youth and seeks to be self-sustaining. Thus far, mullet, goatfish and shrimp have been released. It serves as a model of the harmonious Hawaiian way of life.

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