

HCA Position Paper:

Hawaiian Culture and Conservation in Hawai'i

Position statement

In Hawai'i, integration of Native Hawaiian approaches and knowledge systems with conventional conservation efforts is essential to achieve HCA's vision of sustainable communities built upon a foundation of Hawaiian values and actively perpetuating thriving lands and seas through active management and restoration.

Island conservation and island culture are entwined in past and future

Organizations that focus on conservation and sustainability can learn from successful, place-based strategies as models, because island societies provide original examples of tested sustainable existence. Hawai'i in particular provides a history of integrated land/sea relationships via land use and management within the geographic context of the ahupua'a; the ahupua'a system successfully incorporated land and sea ecosystems and relationships into economic and social process so that both resources and people could thrive over time. One applicable lesson that can be gained from an examination of ancient Hawai'i is the importance to that system of the finely tuned relationship between resources and culture. The rich, native, natural setting of Hawai'i helped define indigenous Hawaiian culture and remains its foundation. Simultaneously, Hawaiian societal/cultural connections to natural systems and native species comprised the primary foundation for management of natural resources.

The importance of a tightly integrated relationship between resources and culture can also be seen by examining the loss of those connections in a rapidly changing world following Western contact. The actions and forces that resulted in a breaking of that interrelationship contributed to our current conservation crises. Consequently, the reestablishment of those relationships represents a reconnection for building a sustainable society that once again values and maintains its unique island legacy. To realize this, exploration of Hawaiian epistemology (world view), tenets of Hawaiian traditional knowledge, and basic Hawaiian values can identify elements critical to conservation that can be embraced by our contemporary island communities.

Hawaiian view of natural resources

Hawaiian world view emerged from many generations of life in this archipelago, and while beliefs are diverse, several key beliefs are common across the islands. One of these common beliefs holds that native species are ancestors to humans. This imposes familial responsibilities on people, and engenders

respect and care for native plants and animals. Many native species are also viewed as physical manifestations of akua (gods), linking natural and supernatural worlds, and removing them from the mundane world, and requiring the attention devoted to sacred matters. Native species and ecosystems are further viewed as an inherent part of place, and cannot be separated from the cultural sense of place. To many Hawaiians, the natural world is in an ongoing reciprocal relationship with people that requires dedication and effort to maintain. Hawaiian cultural identity, knowledge, and practice are rooted in this reciprocal relationship with the land -- and the health of one depends upon the health of the other.

Traditional knowledge

Traditional Hawaiian knowledge encompasses a broad scope, including knowledge of native species diversity, knowledge of ecological processes and patterns, and knowledge of management of land and sea. Such knowledge was originally transmitted purely in an oral, trans-generational manner, and remains embodied in the names of species and places, and in oli (chants), mo‘olelo (stories), and ‘ōlelo no‘eau (proverbs). There recently has been a development of explorations on the process of Hawaiian inquiry: on how traditional knowledge is gathered, assessed, and promulgated. This "Hawaiian Science" is comparable to conventional "Western Science" in terms of observation, manipulation, testing, and promulgation of knowledge. An example of this kind of exploration in the Papakū Makawalu inquiry method promises to create a multi-tiered training approach in traditional knowledge that honors and reinstates ancient knowledge, but is valid and applicable for modern times.

Hawaiian values

The values of Hawaiian people are broad-ranging, encompassing all aspects of human interactions with each other and with their environment. This paper does not intend to cover all values, but points out that many of these values align very well with the cause of conservation. For example:

‘ike: knowledge and deep understanding is highly valued, and essential for survival and producing abundance;

ho‘omau: perseverance, continuity and training ensures long term success and perpetuation of life;

kānāwai: rules dictate appropriate behavior for places and resources, mitigating abuse, waste and overuse;

laulima: pooling of resources and efforts is characteristic of familial coordination and cooperation which extends to nature;

lōkahi: interdependence between all beings is necessary for survival, and the balance of uses is a desirable condition;

Conclusions

For all these reasons, HCA recognizes the value of indigenous Hawaiian approaches and knowledge systems to help address the challenges facing our island ecosystems. HCA's position is that integration of Hawaiian knowledge, values, and approaches into modern conservation efforts in Hawai'i can greatly enhance long-term success. Therefore, members of HCA shall endeavor to implement the following activities among themselves, as their policies and mandates allow:

- Meaningfully engage with Hawaiian communities that are tied to their natural resources;
- Increase efforts to recruit, train, and hire Native Hawaiians into their organizations at all levels;
- Include stakeholder Hawaiian communities in development and implementation of conservation plans as appropriate; convene Native Hawaiian advisory bodies for planning and management consultation and advice;
- Respectfully, seek out and ask permission to incorporate Hawaiian place-based knowledge as a foundation for site conservation;
- Work with and encourage Hawaiian practitioners on resource access and management issues;
- Actively explore and utilize traditional resource management knowledge and systems for their modern relevance in conservation;
- Reinforce Hawaiian values that build appreciation and responsibility for natural resources;
- Learn the history of Hawaiian relationships with our managed lands;
- Work to rebuild and maintain the relationships tying Hawaiians to any given site;
- Integrate the use of Hawaiian language, values and concepts in policy making and practice (e.g., in traditional place names, naming of new species, the creation of job titles and programs); and
- Encourage other agencies and landowners that conserve Hawaiian ecosystems of the need to integrate Hawaiian knowledge, values and approaches into their conservation efforts.

This position paper was initially drafted by the staff of several HCA organizations that currently recognize and attempt to integrate Hawaiian values and knowledge in their resource management programs. As with all its position papers, the views expressed by HCA are not meant to exclude or censure any of its members. We recognize that organizational policies and mandates may preclude or limit implementation of any of HCA's recommendations by that member.
