Heritage in the Landscape
Honoring and Preserving Hawaiian Cultural Landscapes

BY DAVIANNA PŌMAIKA‘I MCGREGOR

Wahi pana is the Hawaiian name for cultural landscapes, which are legendary, noted, and celebrated places. They are named, as families are named, to reflect the spirit, features, elements, and significance of their locations; their natural elements; and their relationships to great persons, families, and events.

The prominent professor and kupuna—honored elder—Edward Kanahele explained:

In ancient times, the sacred places of Hawai‘i, or wahi pana of Hawai‘i, were treated with great reverence and respect. These are places believed to have mana or spiritual power. For Native Hawaiians, a place tells us who we are and who is our extended family. A place gives us our history, the history of our clan, and the history of our ancestors. We are able to look at a place and tie in human events that affect us and our loved ones. A place gives us a feeling of stability and of belonging to our family—those living and those who have passed on. A place gives us a sense of well-being, and of acceptance of all who have experienced that place.

A wahi pana is, therefore, a place of spiritual power which links Hawaiians to our past and our future. Our ancestors knew that the great gods created the land and generated life. The gods give the earth spiritual force or mana. Our ancestors knew that the earth’s spiritual essence was focused at wahi pana.¹

Native Hawaiians, then and now, love and care for cultural landscapes as an integral part of our ‘ohana—our extended families and communities—especially in the rural areas of our islands. They also distinguish and reserve special lands as sacred places and realms to acknowledge the extraordinary mana that converge there.
While the land of the Hawaiian Islands is fundamental to the multilayered cultural and social history of its peoples, in many areas the landscape has been transformed over time—by natural forces as well as by those who have lived on it, cultivated it, and developed it for various purposes.

Early Native Hawaiians cleared expanses of native plants along coasts and streams, and from lowlands and slopes, in order to cultivate taro and sweet potatoes, bananas and breadfruit. A joint study by Sam Gon III, a biologist with The Nature Conservancy Hawaii, and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) estimates that the pre-1778 ecological footprints range from 7.8 percent of Hawai‘i Island, to 11 percent of Maui, 12.5 percent of Kaua‘i, and 14.1 percent of O‘ahu. Alterations to the landscapes provided for the subsistence of the Native Hawaiian people under a self-sufficient social system that sustained a population estimated to range from 400,000 to as high as 800,000.

The original features of Hawaiian landscapes are now difficult to distinguish, except through our imagination. The landscape is layered with relationships: first, those established by our Native Hawaiian ancestors, and later, those created by waves of European and American settlers and Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants.
Not all of these relationships have been beneficial for the land, and today, many threats to the quality and integrity of Native Hawaiian cultural landscapes hamper their access and use.

**TRANSFORMATION AND EVOLVING THREATS**

The advent of a capitalist system alienated Native Hawaiians from their ancestral lands as productive food gardens and lowland rainforests were cleared and naturally flowing streams diverted for sugar and pineapple plantations, cattle ranches, and military bases. In the decades after Hawai‘i became a state in 1959, development focused on resorts along coastlines and housing subdivisions and shopping malls on agricultural lands. The study by Gon and OHA concluded that the contemporary ecological footprint is 41 percent of Hawai‘i Island, 70 percent of Maui, 96.4 percent of Kaua‘i, and 83 percent of O‘ahu. Hawai‘i’s population is 1.37 million, and in 2016, 8.9 million tourists visited the state. Hawai‘i imports 80 percent of its food and 91 percent of the energy that it consumes.

Contemporary threats to Hawai‘i’s cultural landscapes stem from the international capitalist economy’s demands for profit and United States’ reliance on a strong military presence to maintain its global prominence.

**MULTIPLE HEIRS AND OFFSHORE LANDOWNERS**

Important cultural landscapes that have survived into the 21st century are now threatened because they are on lands owned by Native Hawaiian ʻohana, or extended families, with multiple heirs—in some cases, multiple heirs with unclear titles—who can more easily divide money from the sale of land than divide the land itself. Some lands are owned by offshore transnational corporations that purchase properties, make improvements, and then sell them at a profit.

The largest and oldest heiau—temple—on the island of Moloka‘i is the ʻIli‘iʻiʻiʻpaʻe Heiau, which stands on 1,824 acres. In September 2018 the multiple heirs of that property listed it for sale for almost $4 million. Although both the Trust for Public Land and Moloka‘i Land Trust have been in conversation with the heirs regarding conserving the heiau, its future stewardship remains uncertain as long as it is on the market.
Many exquisite cultural landscapes on Moloka’i are located on the 55,575 acres of **Moloka’i Ranch**, which covers 35 percent of the island. The ranch belongs to GL Limited, part of a portfolio of global investments that also includes a chain of hotels in Great Britain and a resort in Fiji. The company is headquartered in Singapore, is registered in Bermuda, and has its largest stockholder in Malaysia. In 2017 GL Limited **listed the ranch for sale for $260 million**. The Native Hawaiian community of Moloka’i have asked the **Office of Hawaiian Affairs** and the **Kamehameha Schools** to buy the land. Failing that, the community is prepared to negotiate the protection of and access to the cultural landscapes with any new landowner.

The potential for multiple heirs and offshore landowners to sell lands poses similar threats to properties on every island, from Grove Farm on Kaua’i to Hawai’i Commercial and Sugar lands on Maui and Kukaiau, to Monoha’a Ranches on Hawai’i Island.

**ALTERNATIVE ENERGY AND GEOTHERMAL DEVELOPMENT**

Efforts to develop alternative energy sources have also endangered Hawaiian cultural landscapes. Geothermal energy comes from what Native Hawaiians have revered for centuries as the akua—god or elemental life force—named Pelehonuamea. Whereas the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) protects sites of religious worship, it does not protect deities or life forces themselves. By contrast, Hawaiian chants speak of natural laws, kānāwai, that mandate the protection of the creative force of the volcano. He Kua’ā Kānāwai is the law of the burning back. According to Dr. Pualani Kanaka’ole Kanahele, respected scholar, educator, and practitioner of Hawaiian dance and cultural traditions,
“The concept behind this idea is that if the earth is hot it still belongs to the Goddess and if it belongs to her it is sacred. If the earth steams or if any other sign of heat still exists on the land or the water surrounding the land because of volcanic activities, then the effect of the law exists.”

The heat and the steam signify a place in the landscape where creation is occurring, and humans must allow the natural processes of creation to continue in order for life on the islands to continue. Disruption of the natural laws has severe consequences.

Proposals to generate 400 megawatts of wind power on Lāna‘i and Moloka‘i islands and transmit them to O‘ahu through an undersea cable threatened expansive cultural landscapes, cultural sites, areas for hunting and fishing, and ocean resources on both islands. Community opposition managed to defeat these plans.

Proposals for the development of geothermal energy also met with opposition on Hawai‘i Island. An initial proposal for geothermal energy development at Kahauale‘a, an area adjacent to the Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park, was thwarted when Kīlauea, a volcano at the center of the lands to be drilled, began erupting in January 1983—an eruption that continues to this day. A subsequent proposal suggested generating 500 megawatts of electricity in the volcanic rainforest of Wao Kele O Puna, located in Kīlauea’s rift zone. A broad coalition of Pelehonuamea spiritual practitioners; residents of Puna; and the Rainforest Action Network, Earth First, Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Greenpeace International opposed that proposal from 1983 through 1994, ultimately defeating it. However, Puna Geothermal Venture—a smaller geothermal plant that generated 38 megawatts at peak production—was completed in 1993 by Ormat, an Israeli corporation in the rift zone at Pahoa. On May 3, 2018, Kīlauea’s ongoing eruptions grew massive, and lava covered three of the plant’s wells, burning a substation and warehouse. The future of the geothermal plant remains uncertain.

The Kīlauea volcano is Pelehonuamea’s realm and a sacred landscape for those who honor her. That includes all the elemental forms associated with the volcano: the rocks and cinders; the flowing and fountaining lava; the fire; the projectiles; and the
steam, which is considered her life force, as blood is the life force of humans. The extraction of the steam, then, will deplete the life force of the volcano, and the deity will no longer manifest to future generations. According to Dr. Kanahele, 

“Pele has always been a very vivacious deity that has been alive for us and has been kept alive because of the activity of the volcano. As long as there is steam in the air any of us who are practitioners or who live in the Puna/Kaʻū area will know that the deity is alive. And once this steam is cut off from us and taken elsewhere, this part of our culture will die.”

As PeleHono‘uamea continues to create new land, expanding her realm in Hawai‘i, new chants and hula will honor her, and her overwhelming presence will inspire and perpetuate the Native Hawaiian cultural and spiritual beliefs, customs, and practices.

MILITARY USE OF LANDS

U.S. military bases and training areas have seriously impacted Native Hawaiian cultural landscapes. On the island O‘ahu, the construction of the Pearl Harbor shipyards and drydocks destroyed the fishponds and fishing shrines at Keawalauapu‘uloa; the construction of the Marine Corps Base Hawai‘i damaged sacred burial sites and rich fishing grounds at Mokapu; live fire training condemned the rainforest and ancestral lands, heiau, springs, and shrines at Mākua valley; and the homelands of Lualualei were confiscated for ammunition storage and communication towers. Military bases now cover 25 percent of the island. The Department of Defense also controls 108,863 acres at Pohakuloa on the island of Hawai‘i for live ordnance training and runs an observatory at Haleakalā on Maui. It also owns the Pacific
Missile Range at Barking Sands on Kaua‘i, which includes a 1,100-square-mile underwater range and 42,000 square miles of controlled airspace. Within that missile range are the sacred burial sites at Nohili. The sacred island of Kaho‘olawe was taken over for bombing and live ordnance training exercises.

THIRTY METER TELESCOPE ON MAUNA A WĀKEA

Mountain summits are sacred places, and the summit of Mauna A Wākea—“Mountain of the sky father Wākea,” the world’s tallest mountain when measured from its base under the ocean—is one of the most sacred places in Hawai‘i. Since 1970, 13 telescopes have been built on its summit, by the U.S. Air Force and private corporations, as well as Canada, France, and Japan, under the management of the University of Hawai‘i. In 2009 an international consortium of astronomy institutes intent on developing an extremely large Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) began the process of building one on Mauna A Wākea, sparking prolonged resistance. Protectors of the mountain disrupted the official groundbreaking ceremony, blocked construction from 2014 through 2015, and have stalled building permits through a series of legal challenges.

STEWARDS AND PROTECTORS

Since the 1970s, communities throughout Hawai‘i have organized to protect their natural and cultural lands and resources. For example, the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana has revived and popularized Aloha ʻĀina as a practice of cultural and spiritual stewardship of cultural landscapes. This Native Hawaiian practice refers to loving, caring for, and respecting the land through customs that support sustainable stewardship. ʻĀina means “that which feeds us,” and in caring for the land and surrounding ocean, Hawaiians protect the resources needed to sustain our families and communities.

The Edith Kanakaʻole Foundation is an intellectual and spiritual powerhouse rooted in the Pele and hula traditions, that guided the renewal of cultural practices on Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe, and leads in the revival of Hawaiian scientific methodology and knowledge. Kua‘āina Ulu ‘Auamo sustains a network of 25 communities providing
stewardship of their lands and waters, including stewards for 38 fishponds and complexes and a network of 30 gatherers and keepers of the traditional uses of limu—seaweed. Hawaiian advocates have also invoked federal laws such as the NHPA, Environmental Protection Act, and American Indian Religious Freedom Act to prevent damage to cultural sites and natural resources and to demand access to them for religious practices.

Native Hawaiians succeeded in stopping the bombing and military use of the island of Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe—thanks to a movement led by the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana. Through the rededication of religious sites, spiritual ceremonies to heal the land, and cultural stewardship of the island, they have elevated the island to its original status as a sacred center for training in cultural customs and practices. Native Hawaiian advocacy and initiatives provide inspiration and hope that future generations in Hawai‘i will be able to connect with and experience the great centers of natural and spiritual power throughout the Hawaiian islands. FJ

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TAKEAWAY
Learn more about the recent theme study on Asian American and Pacific Islanders from the National Park Service, which includes more on this subject from Davianna Pômaika‘i McGregor

VIDEO
PastForward Trust Live: Culture-Nature Connection featuring Terry Tempest Williams

2 The pre-contact ecological footprint for the other islands are: Moloka‘i: 8.5 percent; Lāna‘i: 13.6 percent; Kaho‘olawe: 14.3 percent; and Ni‘ihau: 72.1 percent.
4 The contemporary ecological footprint for the other islands are: Moloka‘i 84 percent, Lāna‘i 78 percent, Kaho‘olawe 83 percent, Ni‘ihau 72.1 percent.