

# MPA Perspective: Reflections on Resource Management, Native Hawaiian Culture, and Papahānaumokuākea

**Editor's note:** Miwa Tamanaha is executive director of KAHEA, an alliance of Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners and environmental advocates concerned with protecting Hawai'i's environment, resources, and people. KAHEA and other local and national conservation organizations worked for years to gain protection of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, culminating in the designation by former US President George W. Bush of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in 2006 ([MPA News 8:1](#)).

The Native Hawaiian monarchy that ruled Hawai'i as a sovereign state was overthrown in the 1890s as part of a US government-supported coup. Hawai'i became a US state in 1959.

## By Miwa Tamanaha

Hawaiian management of marine resources is a system that has changed over time. As do Western systems, Native Hawaiian policies toward ocean resources have evolved in response to political shifts, environmental changes, and social realities. So when we say "Native Hawaiian management", we are talking about different things at different times and different places.

However, we can identify a few fundamental principles that characterize Hawaiian resource management systems. In the Hawaiian language, there is no word for "religion" and no word for "nature". What is fundamental to Hawaiian management of resources is a world in which the sacred is intimately tied to resource management, where the separation of "nature" and "gods" and "man" is not analogous to Western divisions. (For example, a god may be embodied in an animal or landform, and that landform or animal may be an ancestor to a living human.) Also, the rights and responsibilities on which Hawaiian resource management is based are intergenerational. This is such that the rights "belong" to the following generation, for which today's managers are to be stewards.

In practice, even after overthrow of the monarchy and up until statehood in 1959, there existed in Hawai'i an evolving and complex system of rights and responsibilities through which marine resources in Hawaii were managed. The basic unit of this system was the ahupua'a, a land subdivision that generally runs from mountain to sea, often following from spring to stream mouth to nearshore ocean area. Embedded in this system was the sovereignty of communities to manage resources as a commons, including via closed seasons for species of fish and closed areas for fishing.

## The success of Papahānaumokuākea

Planning and management for Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument began long before it was designated in 2006.

Uncle Louis "Buzzy" Agard, one of our kupuna (community elders), used to fish the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands many years ago. He tells the story of how he began to see that the fish he was taking did not come back - that there were fewer each trip. On one trip, he looked around and was struck with a revelation of the broad history of exploitation of that place - from sandalwood trade to whaling, from coral harvest to pearl oysters driven close to extinction. He knew, he says, that this was not what the place was for. He turned his boat around and never went back. Similarly, when fishing permits for Native Hawaiian fishers were made available to take boats up to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, many who had the skill to go purposefully refused those permits.

Though many individuals and organizations from other parts of our planet brought critical resources to the effort to create an MPA for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, this effort was led by Native people and practitioners. The MPA we have in place today was built upon the vision they first articulated in the 1990s, at a time when Federal proposals for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands were focusing instead on expanded tourism and a new recreational fishery. The no-take protections in place for the Monument are rooted in the protective rules that Hawaiian practitioners put to paper.

There remain challenges, though. To date, the Monument still has no public advisory body. The Federal agencies in charge of the Monument are exercising authority, but with little to no public accountability or transparency. And despite the contribution of cultural practitioners to the establishment of this MPA, public dollars dedicated to cultural access, practice, and research remain a small fraction of the total public funds spent in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands - less than 1%, according to the Monument Management Plan.

We have come a long way, but we also have a long way to go. Every day we are working toward the realization of accountable, integrated, and cooperative management.

## **MPAs as part of an eco-cultural system**

We must recognize that the damage done to the world's oceans - overfishing, poor water quality, marine debris, coral bleaching, disease, hypoxia - is overwhelmingly the result of unsustainable practices of industrialized societies. Yet the burden of conserving what remains often falls to native peoples and first nations. Efforts to establish MPAs should respect their sovereignty to determine the future of their people, and the future of the natural resources on which their survival depends. Indigenous people are not one of many stakeholders, and should not be treated simply as advisors to a process that is imposed upon them.

In the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the effort to create the MPA that became the Monument was led by fishers and other cultural practitioners. Good marine science is imperative, but is not enough. Place matters. Culture matters. MPAs are not a model to be plopped on top of a place and its people. Marine areas, however remote, are part of an eco-cultural system in which people, place, and culture are inextricably intertwined. MPAs must responsibly become part of that eco-cultural system, and when done right, will be appropriate to their place.

### **For more information:**

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