

LAND & WATER

'ĀINA

To maintain the connection to the past and a viable land base, Native Hawaiians will participate in and benefit from responsible stewardship of Ka Pae 'Āina O Hawai'i.

Ancestral resources of Ka'ūpūlehu dwindle

Community driven marine reserve rules aim to mālama the once vibrant coast

By Wayne Tanaka

When David Chai stepped onto the Keāhole Airport tarmac 25 years ago, there was much to occupy his thoughts. Just that year, President George Bush had ordered a halt to all bombing on Kaho'olawe; Castle & Cooke had announced its decision to end pineapple cultivation on Lāna'i; and a world away, Nelson Mandela was freed from an apartheid prison. But at that moment, under the hot Kona sun, his mind drifted to the throngs of mū he had seen on a previous dive, outside of his new job site at Ka'ūpūlehu.

"There were so many, and big ones," he would later recall. An avid spearfisher, the young Kamehameha Schools graduate and budding marine biologist was amazed by the thriving reef he had witnessed.

Little did he suspect that the prolific mū would vanish in the coming years, and that the unparalleled abundance he saw was in fact the last remaining vestiges of Ka'ūpūlehu's fabled fisheries. Nor could he have known that he would soon join a 20-plus-year effort by the lineal descendants of Ka'ūpūlehu to restore the resources many of their families had known since before the time of Kamehameha.

For generations, Ka'ūpūlehu's isolated and rugged coastline was carefully managed by families intimately familiar with its resources and sites. However, the 1975 development of the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway, combined with new public parking lots just a stone's throw from shore, provided an unprecedented ease of access – triggering an all-too familiar story of decimation and loss.

Almost overnight, the most valuable resources – charismatic sea shells and lobsters – went missing, followed by the once plentiful he'e and uhu. A Kona development boom and the paving of yet more roads to the ocean accelerated the decline; fish could now be trucked out in 100-quart coolers, rather than hiked out over rough lava by foot and hand. The giant schools of kole, 'ū'ū, and pāku'iku'i that once roamed mere yards from shore, along with many other targeted species,



A Conservation Action Plan has been developed to protect Ka'ūpūlehu's natural and cultural resources. - Photos: Courtesy



Lineal descendant Kekaulike Tomich participates in a fish count survey to document trends in fish type, size, and abundance.

were decimated in the ensuing decades. Some kūpuna, disheartened by what they saw, simply stopped fishing.

Lineal ahupua'a descendants, however, did not stand idly by. In the mid-90s, when word spread of a resort's shoreline dredging project, Arthur Mahi and Hannah Kihalani Springer organized a coalition of community groups to defend the resources and practices of their place. With the help of attorneys, including a young Lea Hong with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, they filed lawsuits against the coastal destruction and, later, the proposed re-districting of lands to accommodate more development. The latter lawsuit resulted in the seminal *Ka Pa'akai o ka 'Āina* opinion, which now requires all government agencies to explicitly consider and protect cultural resources in their decisions. The former established a committee of kūpuna and others to help steward Ka'ūpūlehu's

nearshore resources, and the Ka'ūpūlehu Marine Life Advisory Committee, or KMLAC, was born.

Joined by experts such as Chai, today Hualālai Resort's award-winning marine specialist, and later The Nature Conservancy's quietly brilliant Chad Wiggins, for 20 years KMLAC and its Nā Kūpuna Council members ceaselessly pursued their goal. Collectively, they have compiled extensive ethnographic information; conducted regular coastal water quality testing; restored and maintained anchialine ponds; established

best practices for hotel landscaping; examined dozens of studies pertaining to reef ecosystems and species in West Hawai'i and elsewhere; surveyed over 400 underwater sites and hundreds of fishers over a number of years from Ka'ūpūlehu to Kīholo; and developed a Conservation Action Plan for the natural and cultural resources and practices of Ka'ūpūlehu; among many other activities.

Their work has now culminated in a critical first step in their overall mission: a proposal to "Try Wait," to rest Ka'ūpūlehu's waters for 10 years, in order to provide key species time to grow and produce sufficient offspring for a sustainable subsistence fishery. By that time, they will have compiled enough data – on spawning seasons, on fish assemblages, on the practices of the past – to implement a subsistence fishery plan that may feed the families of the region indefinitely.

Ten years may seem like a long time to some, but for those who have watched their ancestral resources diminish for 40 years, and fought to protect them for the last 20, this is a small investment to benefit untold generations. While uncertainties exist – including the addition of 15,000 planned housing units in Kona, and the attendant strains and pressures of an ever-growing population – it is clear the commitment of the children of Ka'ūpūlehu will remain steadfast.

As Auntie Hannah might say, "We'll try."

(To learn more about the KMLAC's work and how you can support their efforts to mālama 'āina, see their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/KMLAC.) ■