

WE ARE OCEAN PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MARINE CONSERVATION

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A Time Apart

Ua 'ea a'e ke loa'a 'ole

"The 'ea lives when it is not gotten." HAWAIIAN PROVERB

What you are about to read was composed many years ago. It was written extemporaneously, partly to factually fulfill a requirement but mostly to ease the author's internal conflict. It was never disseminated and has since languished forgotten in an archived computer file. Recently, however, certain events have jiggled the recesses of the author's mind, allowing heartfelt memories to painfully come forward again. He can still recall the first time he saw a rose and marveled how beautiful it was, how fragrant the scent, and how soft the petals. Since then, he has learned a lot about life and much about roses. Each rose he now sees evokes systematic concepts like photosynthesis, osmosis, transpiration, chlorophyll, and other tangent notions. Knowledge, it seems, has become a double-edged sword that way. Unlike before, he knows a lot about roses these days, but oftentimes wonders, where have all the flowers gone? He longs for those days when he could look at a rose and simply appreciate it for what it was, just a beautiful mysterious flower and a gift from Ke Akua ... this spiritual experience being to him the source of all true art and science.

In keeping with the spirit of the story you are about to read, the author has chosen to remain anonymous.

We had never met, but our paths crossed many times before. Each year during the time known as *kau wela* to native Hawaiians she would announce her arrival with subtle imprints in the sand. Each year she would steal up from the night to lay her eggs amidst the dangling pōhuehue vines that outlined the crescent-shaped bay. And each year for the past twenty years, I would make the long trip to the same remote beach for our annual rendezvous.

She was certainly not bashful when it came to saying hello. Again and again, she would crawl from the bosom of the sea to deposit her clutches. Each day thereafter under the blazing sun, I would trace her meandering tracks to locate and count her nocturnal excavations. Some years our footprints would mingle as many as six or seven times. Her tracks, easily discernable in the morning sun, became less distinct as the day wore on. Each gust of wind softened her footprints with drifting sand. By day's end only a concerted effort by knowing eyes could distinguish the traces of her nightly visits. Soon enough the relentless trade winds and undulating tides would cover her tracks, leaving the beach a blank canvas ready to be painted by her next appearance.

Dutifully, we each revisited the secluded beach over and over again. For three months at a time, our footprints merged every fourteen to eighteen days until she was utterly spent and returned no more. Her arduous mission completed, she vanished to

parts unknown until the following summer. My reprieve was never that long. Within weeks the leathery spheres she left behind transformed into miniature replicas of herself. At a predetermined time, they would erupt en masse from their sandy cradles and dash frantically to the beckoning sea. At the water's edge, the unremitting waves pummeled them relentlessly. Paddling fiercely, the stronger ones made their way past the shore breaks to relative safety. Their weaker siblings were not so fortunate. They were carried backward and tossed onto a rocky promontory only to become wedged between boulders. If the tide was rising, there was still hope. A friendly wave might still carry them back out to sea. If the tide was ebbing, they were doomed. Not many stragglers would survive the blistering sun until the next swelling tide.

Those fateful strandings enabled me to identify their secretive mother as ka 'ea, known to Westerners as the hawksbill turtle because of the shape of its beaklike

mouth. Revered throughout the Pacific, ka 'ea is deeply embedded in our Hawaiian culture. For millennia its dark red meat provided much-needed protein for our ancestors. Various other internal organs became essential medicinal ingredients for lapa'au rituals. Numerous useful utensils such as combs, spoons, and dishes were commonly fashioned from its thick shell. Native fishers found its carapace indispensable in making net needles, mesh gauges, and fish hooks. Its colorful serrated shell was also fabricated into ceremonial adornments such as bracelets and pendants. The role of ka 'ea extended beyond the visceral and utilitarian needs of Native Hawaiians. It also fulfilled a spiritual connection for the first people of these islands. In the ancient creation chant of the Hawaiian Islands, the Kumulipo, it is ka 'ea that was "born from the darkness of the night." It was upon the back of ka 'ea that mortals were transported from the "lower islands" to the "upper outer kingdom." And it was ka 'ea that guarded the ocean passage to the "kingdom of Kuaihelani," the residence of our supernatural gods. So intimately linked are we that ka 'ea is forever ingrained within our spiritual psyche, our genetic memory.

The hawksbill is one of several extant species of sea turtles found in the Hawaiian Islands. Markedly distinct from its larger cousin ke honu, the green sea turtle, ka 'ea is nowhere as common. While green sea turtles abound in the shallow reefs around our Islands, hawksbills are seldom encountered. Twenty years of research as a biologist had allowed me to identify more than several thousand Hawaiian sea turtles with numbered tags. Of these encounters, only two were hawksbills. This discrepancy tugged at my curiosity and begged to be explored. To start, I considered that perhaps a satellite transmitter could be attached to my enigmatic partner. Linked with such a device I would be able to determine her whereabouts after leaving me to care for her offspring each year. My ploy determined, I readied myself for our next rendezvous.

Counting the days between nesting episodes enabled me to predict subsequent visits with amazing accuracy. For several months, as if on a schedule, she arrived to perform her time-honored ritual. Each night she would plow across the beach until locating a suitable spot before carefully excavating a pit with her rear flippers. Painstakingly, she would deposit as many as 120 golf-ball-sized orbs into a well-formed

cavity. And then, as if following a script, she would inch forward and use her front flippers to disguise her nest by flailing sand backward across her back. Once satisfied with her ruse, she would crawl back into the embracing sea from which she emerged an hour or so earlier. At last, after months of clandestine meetings, she was almost completely spent. The time had come to execute my scheme. I carefully counted the last remaining days until her next visit and assembled my gear. After all these many years I would get to meet her face to face. Finally, I'd get to know where she went after leaving me so abruptly each summer.

The kulu moon slipped in and out between dismal clouds. Distant flashes in the sky bode ominously. Through the drizzle I saw a dark break in the white ribbon of foam lapping the shoreline. Slowly at first, but with firm and decided motion, she crawled onto the beach.

With each ponderous stroke she moved farther and farther away from the protecting sea, the lambent moonlight imparting a glimmer off her still wet carapace. Once hidden in the pōhuehue, only the occasional sound of flailing sand synchronized with laborious sighs interrupted the primordial stillness of the hīlu night. It was as if time stopped, and I had stepped back into another world.

She was beautiful! Vigorous and full of fight when I tried to stop her from returning to the sea. It didn't take long to realize that holding her in my prefabricated box was not going to work. Reinforcement with ropes and rocks, stakes, and tree branches had all proved futile. She was too strong and too determined. Not to be outdone, I secured an old cargo net from some nearby flotsam. Weaving several pieces of tattered rope through the webbing, I managed to create a bag. Another fierce struggle ensued, but I managed to guide ka 'ea into my hastily improvised net. As an added measure I hung my pugnacious prize from a nearby hao tree. Suspended several inches above the sandy beach her powerful flippers were completely neutralized. Decades of anonymity now ended, we stared at each other in the silence of the night: I in wonderment, and she in anger for having her life's journey interrupted so unceremoniously.



After watching her dangle and being satisfied she was safely ensnared, I returned to camp to retrieve the transmitter. Barely fifteen minutes had passed, but I could not overcome the apprehension welling deep within my na'au as I hurried back to the beach. My heart sank as I saw my makeshift sack hanging limply in the air. Ka 'ea had dismantled several weathered strands, and that was enough for her to slip away. Thinking there was still enough time, I quickly located her tracks and followed them to the shore, but to my dismay I saw them disappearing into the surf.

In disbelief I stood there stunned, staring hopelessly at her truncated prints. Gradually the rain dripping on my face awakened my senses and made me realize she was safe and well. Outmaneuvering my snare, she now swam unhindered in the sea where she belonged.

Oddly enough, my disappointment was replaced with a sense of relief. It was as if an enormous weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Slowly but surely, the sound of lapping waves began to register in my mind. And then, just as surely, I heard my tūtū wahine's (grandmother's) voice speaking to me in the darkness of the night. "O 'oe no ka maha'oi!" she admonished me. Her words exactly from many years ago when I peppered her with questions about her life. "You are too nose-y!" In the gloomy night, her stern voice rang clear and strong again. "A'ou kuleana." she said. "You need not concern yourself with those things." The difference this time was that I understood exactly what she was trying to tell me those many years ago. She had wanted me to accept her as she was. There was no need for me to know every single nuance of her life. Such things were not necessary. I should have been satisfied knowing she was alive and well, and grateful for the opportunity to share some time with her. After all, shouldn't that have been what mattered most?

I had ka 'ea bundled up tighter than a drum and still she had managed to escape. A more apparent omen there could not have been. It was as if tūtū was again reminding me not to be so meddlesome and to appreciate things for what they were. Ka 'ea was full of life, going about her business as she had done for so many years. I should have been satisfied knowing she was healthy and robust, and successful in fulfilling her life's destiny. Moreover, I should have

been appreciative that she had allowed me to share a moment in time with her. In return, she had asked only for respect and privacy. It seemed only fair to permit her this remaining shred of dignity as the modern world encroached upon her very existence.

During our brief encounter on that remote beach that night, she had reminded me that she was my contemporary and not an amusing scientific curiosity. With renewed appreciation, I wiped the blended rain and tears from my face. Slowly, I turned my back to the sea and walked silently back to camp. If ka 'ea needed to be burdened with some haole contraption, it would have to be done without my participation. I would honor her wishes and bother her no more. I owed at least that much to my tūtū.





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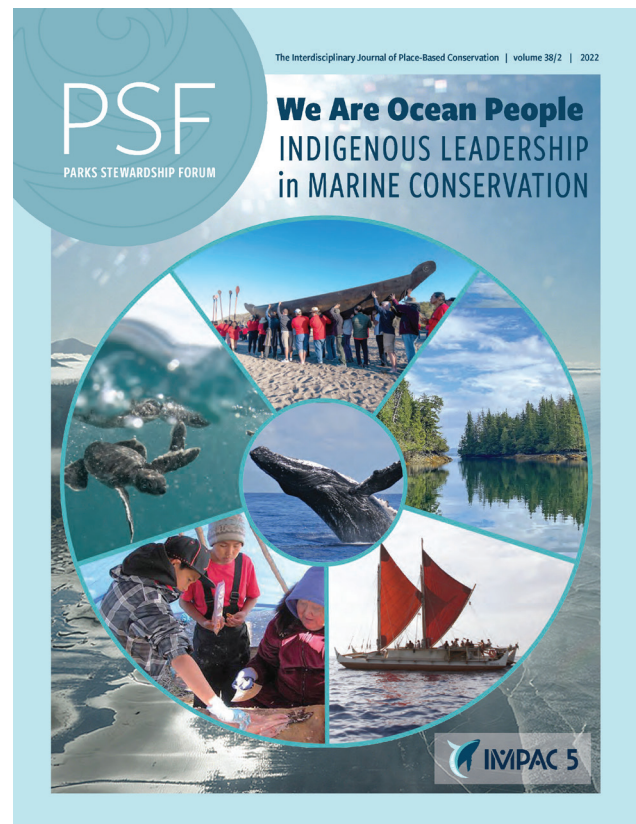
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CIRCLE DESIGN, clockwise from top:

- Northern Chumash ceremony | [ROBERT SCHWEMMER](#)
- Haida Gwaii | [CINDY BOYKO](#)
- The Polynesian Voyaging Society's voyaging canoe Hōkūle'a | [NOAA](#)
- Elder teaching youths, northern Alaska | [US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE](#)
- Baby Honu (sea turtles), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)
- Center: Humpback whale, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)

Background: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve | [PARKS CANADA](#)