

WE ARE OCEAN PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MARINE CONSERVATION
CINDY BOYKO & 'AULANI WILHELM, GUEST EDITORS



From Sea to Ancestral Sea

*Kalani Quicho, Kanaka 'Ōiwi
Nadine Spence, Ahousaht*



Indigenous People come to the ocean from many different starting places, and with many different hopes and feelings. Throughout it all, though, there is an awareness of the presence of Ancestors: what they mean to us, what responsibilities they call forth, and what gratitude we hold for them. In the following collaborative essay, we—as members of the Indigenous editorial team—each share a short personal reflection on what we have felt in helping bring this special issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* into being.

Kalani

When I was a young boy, I would often run away to the ocean. It was just across the street. After school, my cousins and I would go to our favorite swimming spots before heading home. We would see who could jump from the highest point in the most shallow of waters and who could swim the farthest with just one breath. These are some of the lessons I learned from the ocean. In many ways, the ocean raised me and prepared me for life. I have an awareness of my own strengths and limitations, which I know is important to understand when you live in the ocean. The ocean also feels like home and I have so many important memories connected to it. I have had some of my most challenging days working on the open ocean and I have wept in the waves for loved ones lost. I have gone to the ocean to make important decisions and cleansed myself in the ocean before I married the woman I love. I almost died in the ocean and I found life there too. The ocean is my background.

I often reflect on what I know about my own Ancestors and those who have come before me. Especially because some of my Ancestors were ocean voyagers. We were born from this ocean. Like the ancestral islands that are volcanically birthed from the oceanic womb. Like the coral polyp recognized as the early Ancestor of our people in our creation story. There is a wisdom in this sea of islands. A unique ocean heritage unlike anywhere else on island earth. This wisdom is the reason we are still here. In 1946, in a matter of moments, my great grandmother witnessed an unusual change of the ocean. She could not see it, yet she knew that a tsunami was coming. She saved all of her children, including my grandmother who was five years old at the time. Without our Ancestors, we would not be here.

What kind of Ancestor do you want to be? It's a question that I've been pondering ever since my first child was born. It's a question that has challenged me in many ways because of everything that this means, and could mean. Like an open ocean carrying the potential of swells to nearshore seas forming waves in rhythmic reflection. I'll never realize what this means until the surf meets the sand and the lava rock coastline where I belong. Until then, the challenge for me is to navigate through a lifelong journey committed to fulfilling my response. In this moment of closing reflections, I celebrate ocean peoples and future Ancestors throughout the world. This publication is a collection of generous sharing from many different Indigenous experiences, thoughts, actions, and prayers, all of which bring this special issue to life. Like the saltwater that heals and preserves and protects, I hope you will find this essence within.

◀ OVERLEAF

(top) Nihoa as seen from aboard the Polynesian voyaging canoe *Hikianalia* BRAD KA'ALELEO WONG / OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS

(bottom) Pacific Rim National Park Reserve GERRY THOMASEN



As I reflect on the diversity and breadth of articles I have read by brilliant Indigenous minds,

I am grateful to be part of an editorial team putting together this special themed edition of *Parks Stewardship Forum* that raises these important voices and centers Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing in the discussion on marine conservation. The articles reflect a broad diversity and depth of experience in marine management, all of which demonstrates common values of respect and reciprocity and which reveals how Indigenous cultures and Knowledge are relational in nature, seeking reciprocity with the natural world. This wisdom is shared with us from articles that impart important culturally informed monitoring work in Hawai'i, to reverberations of the same principles being applied by Native Alaskans, to the Aboriginal people of Australia Indigenizing and thereby improving climate change vulnerability assessments. In all cases, echoes of laws and principles that guide my own community of Ahousaht resonated with me. In fact, I was so uplifted by the ingenuity and passion of the authors and their work, undertaking practices that Indigenize their studies and enrich the world of knowledge development and contribution to conservation as a consequence. They are examples of Indigenous Peoples assuming the strength of their cultures and laws by not “othering” but taking responsibility, taking their role, their part.

I am also inspired how these stories reflect efforts in many parts of the world to ensure the cultural continuity of Indigenous cultures. They are living examples of Indigenous Knowledge being applied to conservation projects, bringing forward new ways of knowing and understanding. They illuminate the importance of raising Indigenous voices in order to draw on the wisdom of Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge systems that are inherently relational and which provide a different way to connect with the world and the challenges we face in marine conservation.

One of the greatest gifts of my life was to spend a couple of years in my youth working with and learning from Nuu-chah-nulth Elders about our systems of governance and knowledge. During this formative period in my life I quickly learned that in order to understand the lessons being conveyed to me, I needed to learn our language, as it is a window into a way of knowing and being. The beauty of the connection and understanding our people have with the natural world, with its lands and waters, was so evident in this learning. Since then, it has become the mission of my career to help others see and value the contributions of these incredible knowledge keepers, holders of our laws, customs, and practices. It is fundamentally important to respect our Elders and to listen to them to better understand Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge systems in a meaningful and appropriate way. Our challenge is to not incorporate Indigenous Knowledge within another system of knowing, but to have these knowledge systems sit side by side, ensuring their different forms of validation are enshrined in their place in the world. In this way we can appropriately value and apply them to the work that is so fundamentally important—maintaining our relationships with the natural world by way of conservation. Honoring these two systems in a manner that respects these ways of knowing in an equally contributing manner is known as a process called ethical space. To learn more about this process and its application, I encourage you to learn and listen to Indigenous thought leaders whose ideas are available through the links below.

My hope for marine conservation is that we work in ethical space in order to draw out the best of each of these systems of knowledge, which will better equip us to face the challenges of today and work to secure our well-being in relationship with the natural world for future generations.

MORE ABOUT ETHICAL SPACE

- [Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership, “Ethical Space”](#)
- [Willie Ermine, “The Ethical Space of Engagement,” in Indigenous Law Journal](#)





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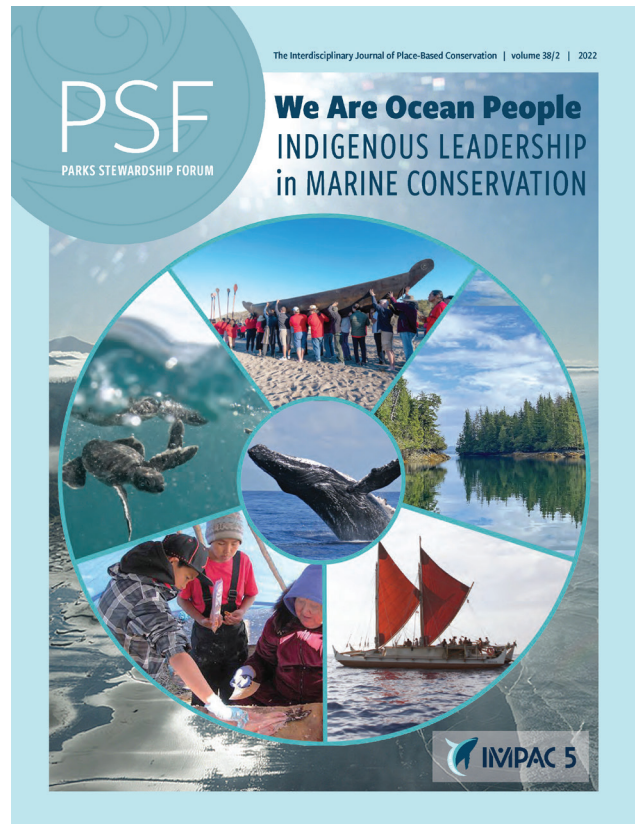
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On the cover of this issue

- 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