

# Who's the *hui*?

## The successful grassroots campaign to protect the fragile Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

By Paul Koberstein

Just six years ago, most people were hardly aware of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands' existence. Today, a strong undercurrent of local, national, and international public opinion supports full protection for the string of islands, reefs and atolls that stretch 1,200 miles beyond Kaua'i.

Thanks to this support, the northwest islands may actually have a good chance of escaping the destruction seen by most of the world's other coral reef ecosystems.

But the support would never have come about if it weren't for a Hawai'i-based network, or *hui*, of Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners, commercial, recreational and subsistence fishers, kupuna (elders), divers, dedicated researchers and local environmentalists with a national and international reach.

Individual members of the *hui* had been involved in fishing or protecting the NWHI for over 50 years. But it wasn't until 2000, when Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners joined forces with local and national environmental organizations willing to support native rights that protection for the NWHI became possible.

Much of the northwest islands are close to pristine, but they are hardly without human impact. The islands have been the sites of numerous sea wrecks and military operations. Commercial fishers have all but destroyed lobster stocks in the islands, and are indirectly responsible for the starvation of many young Hawaiian monk seals, a highly endangered marine mammal. Commercial bottomfishers may be causing continuing and unsustainable damage to the ecosystem, many scientists say. Some of those responsible for managing the northwestern islands' fisheries have been prosecuted for poaching.

The *hui* got its start in 2000, when ecological stress had become clear to anyone who paid more than passing notice to the northwest islands. In their first year, they helped the White House create the 84 million acre Northwest Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve – the largest protected area under U.S. jurisdiction -- and have been working ever since to preserve those protections.

At the time, new proposals were being made to expand existing commercial fisheries, potentially giving convicted poachers even more authority over new and expanded resource-extraction operations within the fragile coral reef ecosystem. Though some of those proposals have been rejected by the Secretary of Commerce, they are far from dead.

Among the first to voice concern about these trends was Louis "Uncle Buzzy" Agard, former head of the Ahi



The highly endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal

(Longlining) Tuna Association and a former NWHI fisher and lobster trapper. "There are many of us who have fished the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands," he said. "We found it's not sustainable. The nutrients are lacking."

Stephanie Fried, a Hawai'i-based scientist with Environmental Defense, a national conservation group, believed that the ecosystems in the northwest islands would be sunk without public involvement. She felt that it was important for national environmental organiza-

coalition of environmentalists and Native Hawaiians, Fried provided detailed scientific and economic analyses, direct connections to policy makers in Washington, DC, and improved technology to allow KAHEA to rapidly communicate with its members and the public.

Takamine says the northwest islands are sacred lands. "Because they are the oldest islands, they have a very special and very spiritual connection to us," she said.

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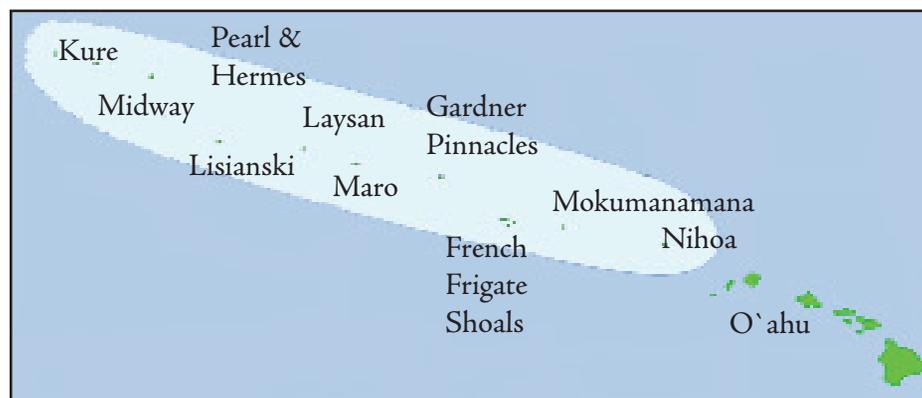
**— Vicky Holt Takamine, 'Ilio'ulaokalani Coalition**

tions to coordinate closely with Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners and fishers, in support of their goals for the protection of their lands and waters.

She worked with Vicky Holt Takamine, president of the 'Ilio'ulaokalani Coalition of respected cultural practitioners to help strengthen the emerging campaign. Working together with KAHEA, a grassroots

"Since 2000, 'Ilio has partnered in a unique relationship with environmental and community organizations to assure maximum protections for our kupuna islands and for full recognition of Native Hawaiian rights and traditional and customary practices," Takamine said. "The *hui* brings together a wide spectrum of local, North American and international organizations willing to support both

### Northwestern Hawaiian Islands



Native Hawaiian rights and conservation. It's been very effective, though we are still substantially understaffed and underfunded."

Takamine credits Fried with doing the technical research and analyses that built the case for strong protections of the northwest islands. "Stephanie has been doing the scientific and economic research to provide the foundation for the positions we are asking for. She understands the process."

The *hui* developed electronic networks to disseminate this information to the public, resulting in thousands of informed and active citizens.

While they understood that the stakes for everyone in Hawaii were significant, they also knew that support from the White House would be critical.

In 2000, at a workshop sponsored by KAHEA and Environmental Defense, and led by kupuna, 65 people from five islands worked on a proposal to protect the islands. This proposal was drafted by Native Hawaiian fisher Isaac Harp, with a "statement of protection principles" drafted by Dave Raney, a diver and Sierra Club coral reef specialist. Raney has represented non-government organizations on the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force and served as Secretary of the NWHI Reserve Advisory Council. Harp became Vice Chair of the NWHI Council and currently serves as an Alternate Native Hawaiian Representative on the West Hawaii Fishery Council.

The result of the community workshop was a locally developed consensus-based proposal, that, through a series of federal hearings, received massive public support. The plan became the backbone of two executive orders issued by White House to establish the 84-million acre NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve.

One of the *hui*'s key contributions in this process was convincing the White House to create an independent and broadly-based Reserve Advisory Council of Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners, local conservation organizations, scientists, fishing and ocean tourism representatives as voting members. The *hui* pushed for the new Reserve Council to be established with strict rules against conflicts of interest. No Reserve Council member can financially benefit from his or her votes. The violation of any marine or conservation laws or regulations are grounds for removal from the Council. This is in contrast with the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Wespac), a federal entity that writes commercial fishing regulations for U.S. waters in the Western Pacific. Wespac members can and do personally benefit from their votes. And those convicted of poaching the very resources they are tasked to protect continue to serve on the Council. At one point, Wespac's chair ran operations which generated large fines for poaching and was heavily involved in the off-the-books

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**— Isaac Harp, Native Hawaiian fisher**

shark finning industry. The White House embraced the *hui*'s position on the make-up and establishment of the new Reserve Council.

For the last four years, after helping to generate the greatest new protections the area has seen in close to a century, the *hui* has kept the NWHI in the public spotlight not just in Hawai‘i, but also at the highest levels of the U.S. government in Washington, D.C. and internationally.

### “On the Same Page”

The *hui* regularly brings the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to the attention of policy makers in Washington, D.C., and is credited by state and federal officials for generating extraordinary levels of public turnout at more than 30 hearings and scoping sessions in the past four years. The *hui* has been instrumental in encouraging members of the public to submit more than 100,000 written public comments to state and federal officials in support of the strongest possible protections for the NWHI and the recognition of Native Hawaiian NWHI traditional cultural rights. *Hui* members have attended and shaped the outcome of more than 100 public meetings – in addition to the hearings – on the NWHI.

“Because of our wide-ranging and diverse local networks throughout the islands, we have been able to articulate and reflect community interests,” said Takamine. “When we put out the call, our communities respond by showing up at hearing after hearing, submitting written testimony, and making clear their support for strong NWHI protections. It’s been very effective. It takes a great deal of time and effort but we work hard to arrive at a coordinated and unified approach, ensuring that we all agree and everyone is on the same page.”

In 2001, the *hui* convinced Governor Linda Lingle (when she was head of the Hawai‘i Republican Party) to withdraw her initial opposition to NWHI protections. The *hui* also persuaded the state of Hawai‘i to withdraw plans for what *hui* members say was a misguided

NWHI “fishery management area.” This plan would have allowed commercial fishing in the most sensitive habitats in shallow state waters. The *hui* persuaded the state agency to propose instead a refuge in state waters; In 2004, members of the public sent more than 24,000 public comments to the Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources, supporting plans for strong NWHI refuge rules. Their efforts also convinced the Bush Administration not to overturn the NWHI Executive Orders throughout its first term.

As a result of leadership from the ‘Ilio‘ulaokalani Coalition, the NWHI have been featured in Ku I Ka Pono Native Hawaiian rights marches of more than 10,000 people, and at the celebrated Merrie Monarch hula festival march. In February 2005, after a *hui* call to action, more than 14,000 members of the public wrote to Wespac protesting their plans to initiate coral harvesting, open a coral reef fishery, reopen the closed lobster fishery and carry out bottomfish fishing in the NWHI.

*Hui* members can’t be in Washington, D.C. all the time to meet with policy makers, yet are influential on the Hill and at the White House. Over the years they have created a tradition of bringing policy makers to Hawai‘i electronically and by telephone. They persuaded a wide range of federal officials in various agencies, Congress and the White House that it is necessary for local communities to be leading the decision-making process on the NWHI. Instead of looking “inside the Beltway” for the answers to local issues, many decision-makers have agreed to meet with Hawaii community leaders by frequent telephone conferences.

This has greatly amplified the voices of Native Hawaiian leaders, local fishers, Hawai‘i-based scientists, and conservationists. As a result, local voices have been instrumental in designing the protections for the islands, and have led to greater public understanding of their extraordinary cultural significance to the Native Hawaiian community.

“We work tirelessly together to coordinate and broaden local, national and international support and to ensure that

North American and international efforts reflect local conservation priorities and full recognition of Native Hawaiian rights and traditional and cultural practices,” Takamine said.

Not all national conservation groups have been willing to work closely with the *hui*, says Cha Smith, executive director of KAHEA. At times, some have undermined local efforts, attempting to negotiate on behalf of local communities without consultation. “Some are like bulls in china shops. They fly in from Washington, D.C. and attempt to interpret what needs to happen, and how it needs to happen. We have concerns when they are not in coordination with us.

“The people here are real savvy,” Smith said. “I don’t think the national groups acting on their own are in a position to do much.”

Takamine said the *hui* successfully built a national network of conservation organizations willing to support local efforts to protect the NWHI ecosystem and Native Hawaiian rights, beginning with Environmental Defense and the Sierra Club. “It’s such an inspiration to learn from cultural practitioners and fishers about how best to protect the amazing biodiversity of these islands,” said Fried.

Fisherman Isaac Harp calls the *hui* “a new approach” toward cooperation. “As a Native Hawaiian and fisherman, I’m proud to be a part of the *hui* because I know that it protects the interest of not only my ohana (family), but all residents of Hawai‘i today and in the future,” he said. He cites the importance of the NWHI as a nursery that produces fish that migrate to the main Hawaiian Islands, replenishing its fisheries. “If there is one place in Hawai‘i that everyone should respect, our kupuna islands are that place,” Harp said.

Last summer, at an international coral reef conference in Okinawa, Environmental Defense persuaded 400 of the world’s leading coral reef scientists from 68 countries to publicly sup-



Scientists have highlighted the lack of knowledge about the impact of removing prey species from this little known ecosystem. In the above photograph, first published in the *Honolulu Weekly*, a veterinarian demonstrates a monk seal’s stomach that she said held at least seven lobsters.

port the strong protections for the NWHI and the vision for the vast culturally important region put forth by the Native Hawaiian community. “We continue to generate international support for local efforts,” Fried said. “But our work is far from done.” ■

*Paul Koberstein is editor of Cascadia Times and the 2004 winner of the John B. Oakes Award for the nation’s best environmental journalism.*

**“By working together, we’ve been able to generate the greatest outpouring of public support ever seen for the protection of the extraordinary biodiversity and cultural resources of the NWHI. Over the past four years, more than 100,000 written comments from people in Hawai‘i and every corner of the earth have been sent to government officials in support of efforts by Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners to protect their lands and waters.”**

**— Stephanie Fried, Environmental Defense**