

Hawaii's First Marine Network for Maui Nui

By Sheila Sarhangi



Maui Nui Makai Network.

Bob Bangarter



Signing ceremony.

Manuel Mejia

Your average person travels from Maui to Lānaʻi on a plane, or by ferry. But in late February 2013, Ekolu Lindsey had a better idea. In two hours, he was about to meet five community groups from across Maui Nui at Maunalei, on Lānaʻi's east side, to sign a historic agreement—a promise, really—to one another. So Lindsey placed a coconut seedling—born from a family tree planted in his oceanfront yard—into a sailing canoe, and he and three friends pushed off the shoreline of his great-grandparent's house in Polanui.

When they reached the middle of the Pailolo Channel, things

changed. “The wind and waves suddenly picked up, and we were in 8 to 10-foot seas. It was kind of like the Gilligan's Island sail,” he says, laughing. Though the coconut was a little beat up—as were they—everyone made it to shore safely.

Several months later, he presented sister seedlings to the four other communities. “I really wanted to share my *ho'okupu* (gift) in a thoughtful way, to represent the common bond that we have together.” That bond is what formed the Maui Nui Makai Network, a group of individuals across Maui Nui who are exerting their *kuleana* (responsibility) to care for the ocean in a way that honors

their *kūpuna* (ancestors), and the cultural and traditional practices of their place.

“It's a shift,” says Manuel Mejia, The Nature Conservancy's community-based marine conservation program manager, “from relying on the State to take care of our marine resources, to communities taking the lead and providing solutions.” When you consider how under-resourced the Department of Land and Natural Resources is, it's easy to see that if conservation is going to have lasting results in Hawai'i, communities must play a larger

role in looking after our coastlines.

That's why the network is a bright spot—an intersection for like-minded individuals to connect and share in their common, grassroots vision. The momentum started in 2009, when community managers from the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network visited Honolulu. “Hearing their stories of community-based management, and their successes, was a turning point,” says Emily Fielding, the Conservancy's Maui marine program director. “Communities told us, ‘This is the model. We want to be able to lead, and influence the way management

Mac Poepoe doing catch-and-release research at Mo'omomi.

Rikki Cooke





Lisa Agdeppa and Ekolu Lindsey.



Manuel Mejia



John Lind and Leimamo Lind-Strauss.

Sol Kaho'ohalahala and granddaughter.

happens in our area.”

Many communities were already managing their own sites. Some had worked for 20 years, and nearly all were functioning in isolation. So in 2012, the Conservancy convened a meeting with community leaders from across Maui Nui. Fielding says, “We just asked, ‘Do you want to form a network so you can connect and share lessons learned with each other?’”

Half a year later, six community groups and their sites became the founding members of the Maui Nui Makai Network: Nā Mamo O Mū'olea and Kīpahulu

‘Ohana in east Maui; Wailuku Ahupua‘a Community Managed Makai Area (CMMA) in central Maui; Polanui Hiu in Lahaina; Hui Mālama O Mo‘omomi on Moloka‘i; and Maunalei Ahupua‘a CMMA on Lāna‘i. The Nature Conservancy and the Maui Nui Marine Resources Council are supporting members.

While no two sites are alike, their challenges overlap. Leimamo Lind-Strauss, who was born in Hāna and raised in Kīpahulu, an east Maui community of roughly 175 people, says a conversation was sparked

when longtime residents started seeing changes. “People that we never met before started accessing fishing sites, and some were holding fishing contests,” she says. “Akule fishing is not only how Kīpahulu traditionally feeds the village, but it’s a way to connect with our community, and to the past.”

With the input of the east Maui community, and the support of the Conservancy, the non-profit Kīpahulu ‘Ohana developed a community action plan. The strategies addressed the area’s major threats and promoted *pono* (proper) fishing practices—a priority for all six sites—as well as the designation of an *‘opihi* rest area, a location where community members are asked to voluntarily refrain from harvesting ‘opihi for three years.

Scott Crawford, the executive director of Kīpahulu ‘Ohana and the network’s newest chair, believes that there’s an underlying value to their efforts. “Our projects are starting conversations that can shape ethics, from ‘who can catch the biggest fish,’ to ‘who can fish in the most pono way,’” he says. “If people start to grasp that it’s everyone’s kuleana to give back, that’s what will lead us to our ultimate goal.”

The network meets twice a year and members have incredible trust and respect for one another. Emily Fielding points to Uncle Mac Poepoe of Hui Mālama O Mo‘omomi on Moloka‘i, who led the first contemporary version of a community-managed fishery in Hawai‘i. “He grounds all of us with his wisdom,” she says. Then there’s

Jay and Maile Carpio, founders of Wailuku Ahupua‘a in central Maui. “Their dedication is unwavering,” she adds. “They’re the first ones to show up whenever anyone needs extra support.”

Mejia compares the Conservancy’s role to coralline algae, the pink algae that cements coral reefs together. “We handle coordination and provide technical expertise, but the network wouldn’t exist without the passion and commitment of the members,” he says. “They’re the ones driving everything forward.”

That includes Uncle Sol Kaho’ohalahala on Lāna‘i. “He’s the sage leader of the group,” says Mejia. “He’ll refer us to the *kumulipo* (Hawaiian creation chant) when we have a governance issue, and say, ‘let’s go back to our roots.’ And then he’ll take out his ‘ukulele and play when we need an energizer.”

Kaho’ohalahala, who is a seventh generation “Lānaian,” is the reason why everyone traveled to Maunalei for the network’s launch. His project implements gabions (dams made from kiawe branches) to slow, spread and sink soil and water after a major rain event to help prevent sediment from smothering coral reefs. And in a deforested, red dirt environment, this is anything but simple. “I know I’m not alone now,” he says. “The network reminds me that we’re all out there, working hard in our own communities—and that makes me feel like we’re making big changes collectively.”

‘Opihi

Bob Bangarter



Kīpahulu ‘Ohana.



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