

# LIFE ON THE WATER



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## The tradition of watermen— and waterwomen—is thriving in Hawai‘i **BY ERIC LUCAS**

**AT FIRST GLANCE**, Earl Kane looks as modern as one can be. A strapping young Hawaiian, he arrives at work in Waikiki with earbuds firmly placed; an MP3 player clipped to his colorful, baggy swim shorts; and rubber sandals on his feet. His bronze skin is illuminated by the morning sun just now starting to splash on the high-rise-hotel-filled district.

As millennially modern as the whole scene may be, Kane is continuing a longstanding historical tradition in the Islands. Working for the ocean activities center as a “beach boy” (a local term for one who dedicates his life to beach activities) at the massive Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort, he helps O‘ahu visitors learn about the ocean and how to have fun in it, safely and skillfully. While surfing is usually the specific activity, the Pacific is the essential thing that Kane helps people connect with.

That makes Kane a waterman—a person who plays a traditional role that’s hundreds of years old. And, as generations of his compatriots have done in the past, and hundreds of them do today, he readily declares he has the best job in the world.

“The ocean is my life. I could not live without the ocean,” says Kane.

Of course, none of us can live without the ocean. It’s the medium from which life on Earth arose and the planet’s largest single ecosystem.

The place of the ocean in Polynesian cosmology is different from its position in the classical Western view



### **Earl Kane**

helps people enjoy and connect with the Pacific through water sports.

COURTESY WAIKIKI BEACH ACTIVITIES

### Haunani Kane

studies coastal geology in graduate school and also practices traditional ocean navigation.



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of the world. Polynesians emphasize their close connections to the ocean. And, though liquid, the Pacific Ocean is as much the bedrock of the world that Hawaiians inhabit as basalt is for people in Oregon.

“This is one ocean people have really lived in, not simply sailed across,” observes University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa anthropologist Ben Finney, who is also a famed ocean voyager.

While Earl Kane’s job helping people learn to surf in the gentle waves off Waikīkī may seem merely recreational to outsiders, it is actually rich with meaning. The ocean is a place of power, substance and joy, and the people who center their lives on the Pacific in 2016 are practicing a cultural discipline that is as important as any in the Islands.

What has changed is the nature of the role, and the description of those who practice it. Traditionally male, Hawaiian watermen were fishermen, and also ecological stewards who kept track of the seasonal rhythms of fish movements. They knew when people should stay out of the water for safety reasons. They set the times when fishing was suspended to allow spawning. They taught other members of their communities how to swim and fish and harvest ocean foods. They were producers and stewards and shepherds, and their role was one of the most respected in Native Hawaiian culture.

In the 21st century, watermen—and waterwomen—may be canoe racers, spiritual practitioners, professional surfers, water-sport instructors, expert fishers, marine biologists and tour operators. They may be young or old and may pursue recreation or science or commercial enterprise in the Pacific. The key criteria that apply to all of them are reverence for the ocean, desire to proselytize that respect, and involvement in active efforts to protect the ocean and expand people’s understanding of it.

Describe someone as a waterman in Hawai‘i and you have applied a term of great respect. It means someone who understands and treasures the ocean. And in the Hawaiian Islands, that means a lot.

**THIS REVERENCE FOR THE OCEAN** doesn’t seem farfetched to anyone who has spent their whole life along the Pacific shoreline, says navigator and geologist Haunani Kane, a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Her research examines the effects of climate change on shoreline communities. Kane (no known relation to Earl Kane) is also learning the art of traditional Polynesian navigation, the activity that originally brought humankind to the Hawaiian Islands hundreds of years ago.

Polynesian navigation relies on stars for directional cues, but also on reading ocean currents, the flight of birds, airborne scents,

### By the Numbers

**1,052 miles**  
of tidal shoreline  
in Hawai‘i.

**76 degrees F**, the average  
water temperature in  
Waikīkī (February).

**582,578 feet**, ocean  
depth to the sea floor  
base of Mauna Loa.

**\$103,398,504**, value  
of fish landed by Hawai‘i  
commercial fishers, 2015.

**7,000** nearshore reef  
species in Hawai‘i.  
—E.L.



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wind direction and wind speed. Legend has it that practitioners depended heavily on smells and other senses and that at least one notable classical navigator was sightless.

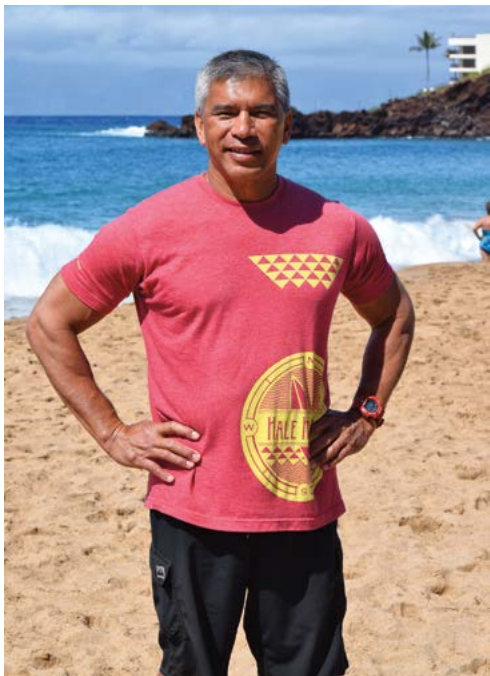
A discipline that had been largely lost in Hawai'i, this style of navigating had a revival starting in the 1970s. That's when anthropologist Finney, artist Herb Kāne (not a close relation to Earl or Haunani) and navigator Nainoa Thompson founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society. They built a canoe, learned navigation from Samoan masters, and sailed to Tahiti and back. Their boat, the *Hōkūle'a*, sails today—it is in the middle of a round-the-world journey—and Haunani Kane has been blending traditional knowledge of the Pacific with her scientific endeavors.

"In Micronesia I saw a map of sticks that depict the Pacific's wave directions," she says. "I've learned the Hawaiian star compass, which has 32 houses, each covering 11.25 degrees in the sky. I've learned how the canoe motion in swells indicates your heading. And if your canoe is making too much noise in the water, you're too far into the wind."

Using these skills, Haunani Kane helped sail the *Hōkūle'a* from Hawai'i to Tahiti in 2014—about 2,200 ocean miles in an astonishing 17 days.

"It's our responsibility to help keep this knowledge alive," Kane says of navigation. "And since I also inhabit the world of science, I'm fortunate to see both worlds. But it's important to remember that scientific research is usually funded for one to two years. Traditional knowledge is built on centuries of observation."

**MAUI WATERMAN IOKEPA NAE'OLE** remembers what Haunani Kane is too young to recall: the time when traditional Hawaiian culture was suppressed. At one time, using Hawaiian language was



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### Iokepa Nae'ole

is a cultural adviser and educator on Maui who helps people learn about ocean activities. He also takes part in regular ocean-conservation efforts.

"I was a member of the fourth generation in which Hawaiian culture had been marginalized," Nae'ole recalls of his early days as a member of a canoe club in Kahului on Maui. "In 1974, when we started out, we had one canoe, and there were just three racing clubs in all the Islands.

"Then in 1975 I learned about Nainoa Thompson and the Polynesian Voyaging Society, and it brought meaning to my work. Today, we have dozens of canoes, and we are one among 11 canoe clubs."

Nae'ole now manages an ocean-activity department for Kā'anapali Beach Hotel and is a cultural adviser and educator for the company Hawaiian Paddle Sports. He spends six days a week on the ocean and devotes a lot of time to caring for the ocean—a caretaking pursuit known as *mālama* in Hawaiian. He led the campaign for a plastic-bag ban on Maui; returns from surfing trips with debris tied to his board leash; and teaches kids when it's appropriate to harvest fish in Kahului Harbor.

"If I'm going to dedicate such a significant part of my life to this harbor, then I need to dedicate a significant part of my life to pre-serving it," Nae'ole says.

forbidden in public schools; surfing, the former sport of kings, was considered a frivolous activity set to catchy pop songs; people scoffed at the idea that Polynesian voyagers could cross great stretches of ocean; and traditional canoes were few and far between.

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**“I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT EVENTUALLY I’D GET A ‘REAL’ JOB,”** says Randy Rarick, with a laugh. Rarick is an O’ahu-based surfing impresario who co-founded the International Professional Surfing organization (a precursor to today’s World Surf League) in 1976, after years of competing. A legend among surfers, he is a leader of the community devoted to the sport—and helps guide energetic ocean people toward preserving and enhancing their saltwater environment.

He has also been active in the O’ahu chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, a group that sponsors monthly beach clean-ups; is endeavoring to ban single-use plastic water bottles (one of the most common litter items in the ocean and on shore); takes an interest in other ocean-environment issues, including public beach access; and generally promotes respect for the arena in which they ride. Sometimes this respect is evidenced by small gestures—but gestures matter.

“When we have a memorial at sea, we bring lei out on the water. But when we cast the flowers on the water, we cut the plastic cord and keep it,” Rarick notes.

“Whatever you show respect for will return to you many times over,” he adds. He says he learned that lesson as a 16-year-old kid from Duke Kahanamoku, the legendary Waikīkī beach boy who was an ambassador of aloha to the world.

“I still live on the beach and surf almost every day,” Rarick says. “If this ocean was ruined, who would want to be on it?”

**“WHEN YOU GO BACK IN THE WATER,** you’re back in the womb of life,” says Mike Spalding. “I have to swim in the ocean every day. It’s a spiritual rejuvenation.”

“I get nervous when I’m on the mainland,” adds Mike’s daughter, Lauren Spalding. “[I ask,] ‘How far is the ocean?’”

Based on Maui, the father-daughter duo is a powerhouse of ocean sports—

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PAUL COHEN

**Randy Rarick** was one of the founding figures of international pro surfing and currently works to promote ocean conservation.

canoeing, open-water swimming, kayaking. The elder Spalding is one of two people to have swum across all nine channels separating the Hawaiian Islands, including the fearsome 72-mile crossing between O'ahu and Kaua'i (which he did as part of a relay in 2010; he swam the entire distance on each of the other crossings). Lauren is a former Olympic kayaker who also, as a canoe-team member, is a nine-time winner of the Na Wahine O Ke Kai, the women-only race across the roughly 41-mile crossing between Moloka'i and O'ahu.

Both Spaldings are active in the same causes that Rarick and Nae'ole support—preserving beach access, keeping the ocean clean and promoting wise use of its resources. The Spaldings also advocate for well-regulated spearfishing, a sport both practice. Lauren lobbies for recognition of the dangers of climate change on ocean shores, too: "The coral-bleaching episodes we've had here recently were

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scary. I could feel the increase in the water temperature," she says.

The Spaldings also promote ocean-sports safety—mirroring a role played by traditional watermen in Native Hawaiian communities.



**The Spaldings**, father Mike (top) and daughter Lauren (above), are accomplished athletes in swimming and canoeing/kayaking, respectively. They are dedicated ocean advocates.

"I think responsible ocean recreation makes people better humans," says Mike.

**"I LIKE BEING PHYSICALLY SEPARATED FROM THE LAND,"** says Brock Stratton, co-owner of Kona Boys, a water-sports gear, guiding and education company that operates in Kailua-Kona on the Island of Hawai'i. "I feel more alive. There's a meaningful correlation between human blood and salt water," he says.

Stratton is grateful and amazed that he can devote his life and business to the ocean. A former mainland business executive, he came to the Islands almost 20 years ago. "I decided to stop chasing money and start chasing life."

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LU'U KAI PHOTOGRAPHY



**Brock Stratton** runs a popular gear, guiding and education company on Hawai'i Island. He also works for various environmental causes.

Now, Kona Boys is a popular surf shop and purveyor of water-sports tours and lessons. Surfing, paddleboarding, snorkeling, kayaking, canoeing—there is little you can do in the ocean in the area for which Kona Boys does not provide gear or lessons or both. And Stratton tries to make sure his company does its part to pre-

serve and enhance the environment it relies on.

He helps sponsor beach cleanups. He's involved in the Kona Surf Film Festival, which raises money for various groups on Hawai'i Island. He took part in the campaign that made Hawai'i Island the first in the state to ban plastic bags. He works with



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environmental and conservation groups to conduct water-quality monitoring and preserve shoreline public access.

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### The Duke and Surfing King

Duke Kahanamoku's towering figure looms over any discussion of the modern Hawaiian watermen, as he set the standard in almost every conceivable way. Born in Honolulu in 1890—when Hawai'i was still an independent kingdom—he grew up within yards of Waikiki Beach, not far from the current site of the Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort (whose lagoon bears Kahanamoku's name). Here he learned to surf and swim, and swiftly proved to be a prodigy.

As a member of the 1912 U.S. Olympics team, he won a gold medal in the 100-meter freestyle at the Stockholm Olympics. He repeated that feat in 1920 in Antwerp, Belgium, adding a gold medal in the relay. He won a silver medal at the Paris Olympics in 1924. After that, he retired from competition and traveled widely, offering swimming and surfing exhibitions. He is universally credited with popularizing the latter, ancient sport of Hawaiian kings, around the globe. Living for a while in Southern California, he appeared in several films, and famously rescued eight fishermen whose boat capsized entering Newport Harbor.

Returning to Hawai'i, Kahanamoku was elected sheriff of Honolulu County and served 13 consecutive terms from 1932 to

locally. And Stratton delights in the fact that, as a Patagonia dealer, he sells gear that the company guarantees for life—send it back and Patagonia will repair it, rather than tossing the item away.

“My life revolves around the water,” Stratton says. “Every day.” Surfing, paddling, swimming, canoeing—anything

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1961. He continued to represent Hawai'i on overseas journeys, and frequented his beloved Waikiki Beach often when at home. He also appeared in the movie *Mister Roberts* in 1955 and on the TV show *This Is Your Life* in 1967. After his death in 1968, his ashes were scattered at sea off Waikiki.

"Out of the water," he said, "I am nothing. Our water is so full of life, it's the fastest water in the world."

Kahanamoku spent his life as an ambassador of the spirit of Hawai'i—*aloha*.

"In Hawai'i, we greet friends, loved ones and strangers with aloha, which means love," he once explained. "*Aloha* is the key word to the universal spirit of real hospitality, which makes Hawai'i renowned as the world's center of understanding and fellowship."

Kahanamoku's legacy is maintained by the Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation, which each year inducts new members of the Hawai'i Waterman Hall of Fame for personifying athletic achievement, the spirit of aloha, and caring for Hawai'i. For more information, visit [dukefoundation.org](http://dukefoundation.org). —*E.L.*

on the ocean, he says. Asked whether he would call himself a waterman or a beach boy, he replies: "Do I have to decide?"

**THE MODERN EXPANSION OF THE** role and definition of waterman has not only broadened its meaning, it has also vastly magnified *continued on page 129*

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### Man of the Sea, Man of the Land

*Clifford Nae'ole, Cultural Affairs Advisor at The Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua, is a leader in Maui's Hawaiian community (and he's Iokepa Nae'ole's brother). Years ago, Clifford wrote a personal essay regarding his two grandfathers, each of whom held to traditional ways, one of whom was a man of the land (mauka), one of the sea (makai)—a waterman. With his kind permission, here are excerpts from Nae'ole's memories of his makai (and mauka) grandfathers. —E.L.*

The love of Grampa Makai was that of the ocean. It was his daily escape, his passion. Like a fine-tuned timepiece, he would return home after his job at the railroad company and prepare to “go beach.” Never—ever—would we be permitted to say he was “going fishing.” It was a rule that if broken would be met with dire consequences. It meant that the day's excursion was cancelled, for these elusive fish had ears that listened keenly for a person's intention.

The beach that formed the crescent of Kahului Bay was immaculate. The sand was a blinding color of white. The ocean, a treasure chest of emerald greens, blues and sparkling diamond hues. There was a constant motion of the sea, its waves endlessly petting the shoreline. All in all, Kahului was indeed a gift of Mother Nature. Beauty could easily come to the eyes of its beholder.

Grampa Makai had a relationship with this gift. It was one of necessity ... but also one of love and respect. This small portion of the ocean would provide him and his family with all the fruits of the sea. He would harvest its offerings, without ever taking advantage of its kindness. “There is always tomorrow,” he would say. For him, going to the waters of Kahului was a spirituality that he practiced religiously. A daily routine that at times would yield a meal ...

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Henry Kui Ching  
(Grampa Makai).

and sometimes not. The fact that this option existed at all is what meant most.

Both of these men—Granddaddy Mauka and Grampa Makai—have passed. If there is a heaven, let it reflect upon their love of life, their life of love. People changed, nature changed, not always for the good. I can only reflect upon their good times. ... I can truly feel their presence within me, urging me to tell their story in order to protect what we have left today. For if we fail to remember what has happened in the past, "There may never be a tomorrow that we can count upon."

Granddaddy Mauka and Grampa Makai believed in a tomorrow because they cared for each day.

from page 127 its scope and membership. Haunani Kane, the lithe young woman pursuing postgraduate studies in geology, exemplifies this perfectly. And when you ask about the genesis of her life path and her first-ever experience with the ocean, the navigator-geologist considers the question and smiles.

"Well, my mom was surfing and paddling when I was still in her belly," she says. "I believe if you always keep track of where you came from, you're never lost." ▲

Eric Lucas is the co-author of the Michelin Must Sees guide to Hawai'i.

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