

Hawaiian studies teachers gather on Maui

Sharing culture, traditions and stories:

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By EILEEN CHAO - Staff Writer The Maui News



Kaleinohea Cleghorn (front) and Lanakila Mangauil, Hawaiian studies teachers from Hawaii Island, perform a hula at Pu'u Mahoe on Monday while overlooking La Perouse Bay.

The Maui News / EILEEN CHAO photo

ULUPALAKUA

From the other side of the cinder cone at Puu Mahoe, a conch shell blows.

Bonny Kahawai'i Herbert, a teacher at Lihikai Elementary School, welcomed in traditional Hawaiian protocol the 60 kumu who traveled to Maui on Monday to take part in this year's 'Aha Kupuna (not to be confused with a senior health and wellness event of the same name sponsored by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs).

Hawaiian studies teachers at public elementary schools across the state have organized the annual Hawaiian studies conference since 1994, event organizers said. The 'Aha is sponsored by funds from the state Department of Education Hawaiian Studies Kupuna Program. Every year, the location in which it is held rotates among Kauai, Oahu, Hawaii Island and Maui.

"It's important because we get to meet our outer island kupuna makua, and everybody can learn from each other," said po'o (head) Ehu Agalevaa, who was in charge of organizing this year's conference. The Kahului Elementary School teacher said that, over the last two decades, the conference has expanded not only in numbers but also in knowledge, and every year "the culture gets stronger and stronger."

This year's conference started on Monday at the Pu'u Mahoe cinder cone about 2,600 feet above sea level on the eastern flank of Haleakala. The site was chosen because it is home to D.T. Fleming Arboretum, the state's oldest and largest native arboretum. It is located on the edge of the Auwahi Forest and contains 150 native Hawaiian plant species, including more than 40 that are listed as endangered.

"I was honored," Martha Vockrodt-Moran, Fleming's granddaughter and director of the arboretum, said of the visit by the kumu on Monday. "We preserve Hawaiian culture by preserving Hawaiian plants. They preserve Hawaiian plants by preserving Hawaiian culture. So we are partners."

The teachers were able to explore the 17-acre property and even do a scavenger hunt for rare native flora like alani and mamake scattered throughout the arboretum.

The story of how David Thomas Fleming acquired the Pu'u Mahoe parcel sets the tone for ongoing conservation efforts today, Vockrodt-Moran said. The growing spread of invasive pamakani weed, poisonous to cows and horses, threatened to end ranching operations at Ulupalakua.

Ranch owner Ed Baldwin had asked Fleming, an agronomist, to help control the poisonous plant. Fleming was able to introduce a type of wasp that fed on the invasive weeds, which helped contain the spread of the plants. In return, the Baldwin family let Fleming have his pick of any parcel on the ranch's property as a gift "for saving ranching in Hawaii."

More than 60 years after the arboretum began planting native Hawaiian plants in 1952, Fleming's descendants still manage it as a public place for residents and community groups to visit. In addition to hosting two public outreach programs every month, the arboretum works with Kamehameha Schools to arrange student field trips. Members with the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission visit the conservation area for traditional plant ceremonies in September, Vockrodt-Moran said.

"My grandfather planted Pu'u Mahoe for Hawaii and for Hawaii's people," Vockrodt-Moran said. "It is theirs too."

Visitors to the arboretum on Monday recognized what a special place it is and the special contribution Fleming made to Hawaiian culture.

"Back in those days, the Hawaiians had to hide . . . they was Hawaiian. The haole people were the ones who planted these trees and malama'd our culture for us," said Kaleinohea Cleghorn, who teaches Hawaiian studies at Kalaniana'ole Elementary School in Hilo. "Now, with the resurgence, lucky for us these people who weren't Hawaiian were taking care of (it) so we (can) . . . come and see all of these native (plants)."

The 25-year-old Hawaii Island teacher said being a part of this year's 'Aha and being around kupuna from all islands was a "humbling" experience.

"I'm young, but I come here and everybody alohas you, and for a young person to come into such an elderly group, it humbles you and it's so grounding," Cleghorn said.

Sharing culture, traditions and stories across islands has always been an important element of the gatherings, but it's also about reaching the students who will benefit from hearing about their teachers' experiences.

"The purpose is to not only teach culture within the public schools . . . but to maintain our values so that hopefully it infects the next generation," said DeAnna Kaina, who teaches 4th grade at Kamalii Elementary School. "It makes a big difference, because the heritage lives on within. When you're able to trace your ancestors, you see who you belong to . . . you see where certain characteristics (come) from."

Other teachers said that the annual 'Aha allows young students, who may never travel to places like Pu'u Mahoe, to learn about it through pictures and storytelling.

"When we talk about our island, some kids never been to Hana or Haleakala, it's sad," Agalevaa said. "I ask them, 'What's the most important thing you know about Kahului?' (They say) 'Ka'ahumanu Shopping Center.' We ask them the name of our mountains. They don't know.

"It's really important that they . . . know where they come from," she said.

For Neighbor Island kumu, learning and sharing information about sites on other islands is doubly important, one teacher said.

"If the kids can learn about their island first, they have a way to identify with that place so when they go to another place, they can respect and understand how that place is different and learn from those people to come back with a different perspective," said Kauai teacher Naomi Yokotake. "This is really a great opportunity to be here. There are places that we get to go that people can't get to, like here (Pu'u Mahoe)."

Over the four-day conference last week, kumu also had the opportunity to take a boat ride to the Kahoolawe reserve, visit the Palaeua Cultural Preserve in South Maui and learn about other cultural sites on the island

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