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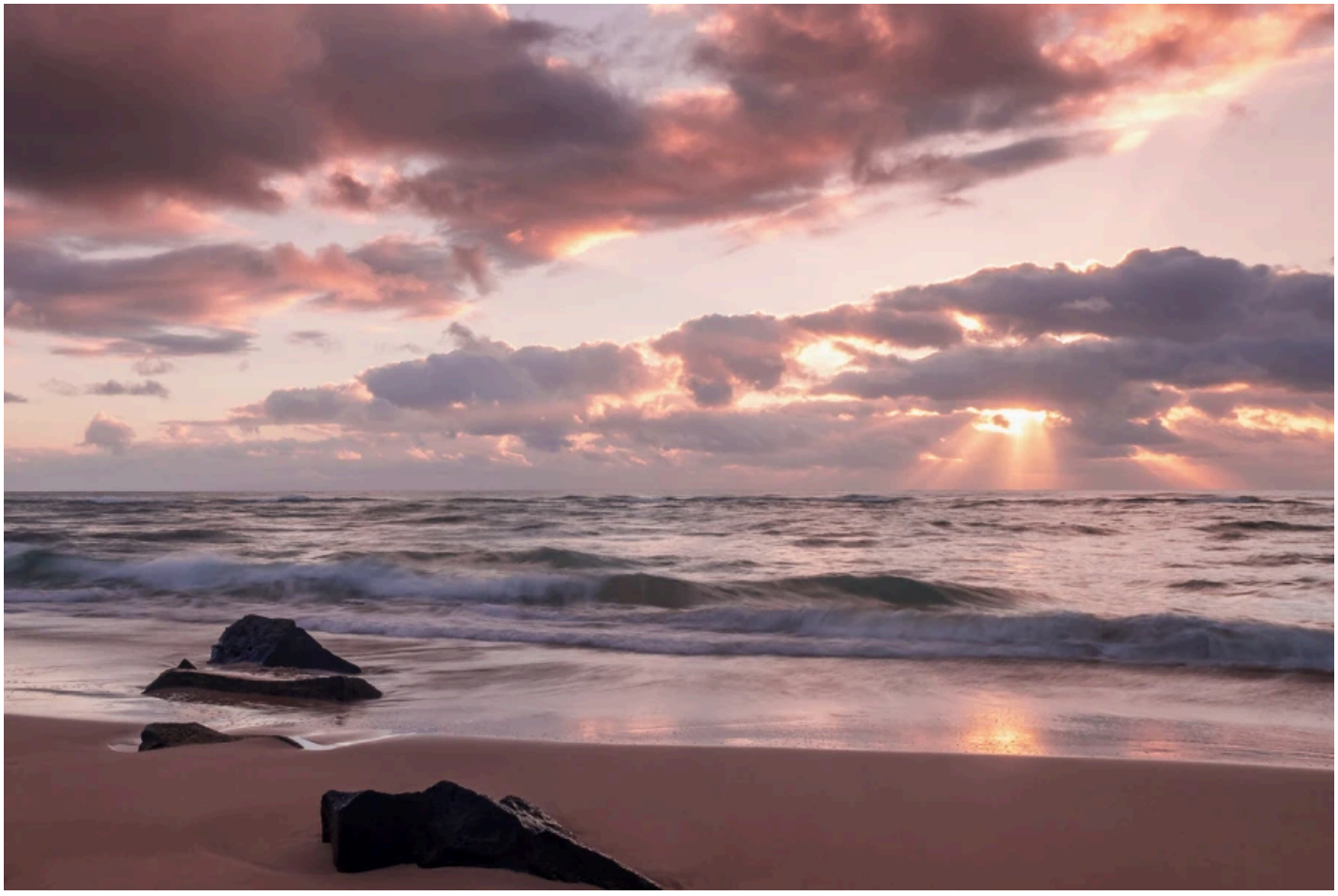
By Jill K. Robinson • July 07, 2021

What Can We Learn From the Hawaiian Concept of Kuleana?

On a trip to Kaua'i, a traveler learns what it means to give back.



Kuleana can mean asking for permission to enter a space not your own—such Lydgate State Park on the eastern shore of Kaua'i. Photo by Jeff Whyte/Shutterstock

The sun's first light illuminates the horizon. On the eastern shore of Kaua'i near the Hikinaakalā Heiau, the sounds of slow handclaps and waves upon the sand are almost primeval, like heartbeat and breathing. Standing before us, Kumu Leinā'ala Pavao Jardin greets the morning sun with a chant, following a centuries-old tradition.

It's my first sunrise a flight away from home since the world shut down more than a year ago. And while this particular sun salutation has a poignant meaning after months of pandemic stress, I'm here at the beach to ask for permission, something travelers rarely do when visiting a place.

Jardin's voice rings out once more, in the *Kūnihi ka Mauna*, a chant derived from the *oli kāhea* chants, a request for entry into any space that is not one's own. "When visitors come to our island, they're showing up at a stranger's door, in a sense, and asking to be welcomed," she says to the group afterwards. "People are looking to learn and connect to the *'āina* and the culture, and that comes with responsibility. And we, as *kama'āina* [Hawaiian residents], need to educate them."

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As we consider what post-COVID life looks like, there's an opportunity to tap into Hawaiian culture's idea of *kuleana*. The word itself means "responsibility," but in a deeper sense that covers a reciprocal relationship between the person who is responsible and the thing that they are responsible for. Visitors to Kaua'i enjoy the laid-back atmosphere and rich culture found in its small towns but don't always observe how everyday kuleana is present. But on this trip, that's exactly what I'm here to explore.

Common Ground, which occupies an 83-acre campus on the island—is looking to revitalize traditional farming practices. Photo by Makana Weiss

Among other things, the pandemic revealed how reliant Kaua‘i is on tourism, which supports about one-third of the island's economy and employs approximately 38 percent of the island's workforce. When tourism dropped during the pandemic, unemployment rates rocketed up to as much as 32 percent in April 2020. One local bank, the Kaua‘i Government Employees Federal Credit Union (KGEFCU), is aiming for change.

"We have to diversify and rebuild the economy in a more sustainable way," says Monica Belz, president and CEO of KGEFCU. "If we link up together, we can transform the cycle of poverty due to the economic dependency on tourism."

The credit union delivers a big impact on a small island, with a model of financing that values people over profit and supporting local businesses. Instead of being beholden to outside stockholders, the credit union passes along earnings to members in the form of higher dividends and lower loan rates, among other things—helping keep money on the island.

Common Ground is one such business KGEFCU has helped. Set on an 83-acre agricultural campus, the organization is part of the growing movement to increase local food production, breaking the reliance on imported food."Our mission is to improve the systems that feed us," says Jennifer Luck, the organization's COO.

> ""We have to diversify and rebuild the economy in a more sustainable way," says Monica Belz, president and CEO of KGEFCU."

That includes cultivating biodiversity on the island. The organization began by building a tropical agroforest—a system in which larger breadfruit and banana trees serve as a canopy for smaller crops, like vegetables—complete with animals and insects such as bees, chickens, and cows, which provide additional nutrition for the agroforest.

The campus also includes a Food Innovation Center, home to both an incubator, run by Common Ground's nonprofit arm, the CG Foundation, and an accelerator. The incubator is aimed at farmers and food entrepreneurs in the early stages of their business—each participant gets $10,000 in investment capital.

The accelerator focuses more specifically on food and beverage entrepreneurs with established models, helping them scale their businesses. In recent months, the first generation of Kaua'i businesses have graduated from the Common Ground programs. Two of those participants are 'Ekahi Market and Rancher's Daughter's Reserve.

Sustainable fishing, using smaller boats and line-and-hook techniques, is a home-grown tradition in the Hawaiian Islands. 'Ekahi's artisan canned ahi honors Kaua'i heritage by using only fresh, local ingredients: ahi that's line-caught off the island's shore, sea salt, Hawaiian chile peppers, Tahitian lime, and ginger root. Justine Bennett, founder of 'Ekahi, feels a strong responsibility to both the ocean and fishermen.

"Tuna species are found throughout the world's oceans and are an integral part of our planet. How we manage our fisheries will have effects for generations," she says."I also pay the same price year-round to my fishermen, which allows them to do well throughout the year, rather than feel as if they're over a barrel to lower their prices for powerful restaurants or hotels."

Over the years, the Cliffs at Princeville have taken significant steps to lowering its carbon footprint. Photo by Linny Morris

Sharleen Andrade is a fifth-generation Kaua‘i rancher. But the changing cattle industry on the islands—where more than 90 percent of beef cattle is now shipped to the mainland for feedlotting on grain before beef is shipped back to island markets—never made sense to her. She knew she could raise and finish grass-fed beef locally, which is exactly what she's done: Rancher's Daughter's Reserve now harvests and processes its own beef for distribution in Kaua‘i.

"I didn't like the disconnection of not having the entire process here," Andrade says. "I want to eat what's in my backyard. I feel like I've found a sense of peace, pride, and legacy by continuing my family's heritage."

Even hotels are embodying kuleana, beyond inviting travelers to eschew daily laundry service. The Cliffs at Princeville, a mixed-use condo resort, has taken advantage of the island's natural climate and its location on a bluff to eliminate air-conditioning and heating units. Instead, the resort uses windows that naturally let the heat out as it rises and sliding glass doors that are strategically positioned to promote airflow.

The Cliffs has also added a large-scale solar energy system that now generates more than half of the resort's electricity. The property has worked to reduce water consumption more than 30 percent over the last two

years, and it relies on FloWater stations for filling reusable containers rather than providing single-use plastic water bottles. Sustainability is a constant focus—as the hotel's many awards can attest—and the board of directors has a standing committee dedicated to finding ways to improve.

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Kuleana also extends to the conservation of native animals, as well as acknowledging their true place in the world. Sharks—crucial creatures in our ocean environment—are often depicted as evil, fierce, and bloodthirsty. In Hawaiian culture, they're also considered *'aumakua*, or guardian ancestors that manifest as animals, plants, or elements. Shark-attack survivor Mike Coots uses his photography to depict the personalities of sharks to stoke curiosity, rather than hatred, and spark interest in protecting them.

"When I go through my images, I try to find a humanistic trait like a smirk or a smile, something that you can see in yourself," he says. "I think if you can see yourself in something else, it makes you want to learn more."

As we re-enter the world, what can we learn from Kaua'i to both help us understand what our kuleana is to the destinations we visit, as well as to our local communities? It may just be the education we need.

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Jill K. Robinson

Jill K. Robinson writes about travel and adventure for AFAR, *National Geographic, Conde Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, Outside, Sierra*, and more. She has won Lowell Thomas, Society of American Travel Writers, and American Society of Journalists and Authors awards for her work.

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