

Lessons Learned About Conservation Practices and Their Impact on Hawaiian Well-Being Among Youth

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The project described in this paper was one of six (6) sub studies in the 'Imi Na'auao project, a collaborative research project which explored the impact of cultural restoration, culturally centered economic development and cultural revitalization in social change on Hawaiian wellbeing. Our specific work was organized around Kupu, an organization grounded in aloha 'aina, cultural restoration and health among youth. Mā'awe Pono was used as a research framework to explore Native Hawaiian facets of food security and aloha 'aina practices. NVIVO was used to analyze qualitative data in the form of youth speeches and journals. Results revealed that Kupu youth believed that their lives had been impacted in 3 ways as a result of their guided land practices and experiences: a) increased sense of pride, b) improved self- confidence and c) an increased sense of purpose. Ultimately, we learned that listening to youth voices, both expressed in written and oral formats, is essential to sustaining knowledge of land, culture and health from generation to generation and for Hawaii's future.

Keywords: conservation practices, native Hawaiian pacific islander youth, health, wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

As we began writing this work we committed ourselves to being explicitly honest. Standing firm in our truth we now know the information contained in this article only scratches the surface of the following 3 qualities of Hawaiian health and wellness: a) what is one's place of knowing, b) how does one's experience inform their health behavior, and c) how can excellence surrounding one's own health and wellness be shared (*aka: 'auamo kuleana + ho'opono*).

Our work began in a collaborative research project, entitled 'Imi Na'auao (or to seek wisdom, fully aware of the fact that the knowledge is already there and that our task is to work *together* to ensure it can meet its potential), which explored: 1) the impact of cultural restoration on Hawaiian wellbeing; 2) the relationship between culturally centered economic development and Native Hawaiian wellbeing; and 3) the role of cultural revitalization in social change for Native Hawaiians. Our work was a part of a larger, *Systems Change*, project that examined the revitalization of 'āina/lahui by identifying methods and ideas for improving Native Hawaiian wellbeing through all facets of food security and aloha 'āina practices. The following research project that is described in this article is one of the larger project's six studies and is specifically organized around Kupu. Kupu is a conservation organization located in Honolulu, Hawaii,

the focus area of this particular study. The participants who are Kupu alumni will be included in this study. This exploratory research study was designed to identify themes related to cultural restoration and to better understand the significance of how youth touching land can impact culture and education.

Research Question

Our research project was designed to support one of the aims of the larger systems change research project to promote a community of practice with an existing community organization. The organization we worked with is Kupu. The meaning of Kupu is to sprout or grow and has connection to kīpuka (place of sanity among insanity, place of self-sufficiency among dependence, place of wellbeing among disease and sickness). Kupu has a two-fold mission: to preserve the land while empowering youth (Kupu, 2020). To address their mission Kupu provides hands-on training in conservation, sustainability, and environmental education for young adults, with the goal of fostering the next generation of environmental and cultural stewards (Kupu, 2020).

In this project, we worked collaboratively with Kupu alumni to examine the relationship between land, culture, health and Native Hawaiian wellbeing. Specifically, we looked to measure the individual and collective level of impact that Kupu has had on youth in terms of health and wellness, which we believed would involve increasing knowledge about land conservation and culture. We wanted to better understand and recognize more about the significance of touching land and its effect on culture and education among youth. Further, we sought to determine how touching land, as a Kupu alum has impacted the overall wellness of Native Hawaiian youth and young adults.

At the start of our project, we simply hoped to bring Kupu alums together to share and learn more from each other's experiences regarding local land conservation practices. We also wanted to hear from this community of youth on how these practices could improve an individual's overall wellness in terms of health and social conditions. However, after our 18-month project, we not only gained valuable feedback on conservation practices and ways youth can engage others to improve health by touching land; we also confirmed that alums are living examples of Kupu's two-fold mission of "preserving land while empowering youth." Evidence of our findings, that *pride*, *identity* and *purpose* among Kupu alums contribute to the relationship youth have to the land and to each other were revealed in our review of Kupu graduate artifacts and the peer research mentoring process.

Primary Research Question

- What is the impact of cultural restoration and revitalization of Native Hawaiian health and wellness?

Secondary Questions

- How do we show that knowledge of conservation among Kupu alum is transcultural/trans-historical/transformational?
- How do we assess the quality of the relationship alums have with Kupu?
- How do we quantify the place-based education alums have received from Kupu?
- How do we expand Kupu's pipeline of employment for youth interested in working in land conservation across the state?
- What is needed to expand and then to sustain this project?

METHODOLOGY

Research with Kupu alumni included the examination of the relationship between land, culture, health and Native Hawaiian wellbeing. In this process we sought to measure the level of impact that Kupu has had on youth in terms of health and wellness, which we believe involves increasing knowledge about land conservation and culture. We wanted to better understand and recognize more about the significance of touching land and its effect on culture and education among youth. Further, we wanted to determine how

touching land, as a Kupu alum has impacted the overall wellness of Native Hawaiian youth and young adults.

This project can be described in 3 phases. In the first phase of this work, 2 opportunities were created to foster the development of relationships among Kupu alum and university partners and also to chart a course for this work. These two opportunities involved Kupu alumni, staff and UH West O'ahu faculty coming together to touch land. The first opportunity was a group service project, Moku' Loe Service Project held at Moku o Lo'e or Sand Island in Kāne'ōhe. The second event was held at the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Ho'okupu Center, formerly known as the Net Shed in Kewalo Basin Honolulu, HI. See Tables 1 and 2 for a detailed agenda of these two events along with the topics and discussion questions that arose during each event. During both of these collaborative opportunities *Mā'awe Pono* was used as the "research methodology" to inform the path for project participants to find solutions to issues of cultural restoration and revitalizing health and wellbeing among Native Hawaiian youth (Kahakalau, 2017).

In the second phase of this project, interested alumni, who attended one or both of the gatherings above, self-identified as wanting to learn more about drawing conclusions on the impact of local land conservation experiences among youth. The concept of 'Auamo Kuleana (collective transformation through individual excellence), which asks does anyone have the desire to do this work, was a component employed as well as the invitation of le'ale'a (must include food, passion, and willingness). Alumni were then introduced and welcomed into the peer research mentoring aspect of the project.

For the third phase, alumni used the new skills gained in the peer research mentoring program to evaluate artifacts of Kupu graduates. Overall, we hoped to learn the ways that local land conservation practices could increase wellbeing and collectively improve individuals' overall wellness in terms of health and social conditions. We thought that findings could be in future work that assists Kupu alumni with developing self-discovery journals, as well as mentoring other youth. Our quest to learn more about the significance that touching land has on the health and wellbeing of Native Hawaiian youth included the following components in detail.

Part 1: Gaining Access/ Building Relationships

In the beginning of this work, 2 opportunities were created to promote the development of relationships and to design a plan for this work. The first opportunity was a group service project, held at Moku o Lo'e or Coconut Island in Kāne'ōhe. See the event agenda and discussions questions below in Table 1.

TABLE 1
GAINING ACCESS/ BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OPPORTUNITY #1

Moku o Lo‘e Service Project- Kāne‘ohe, HI Agenda- September 16, 2017	Discussion Questions
<p>9:00 a.m. Welina</p> <p>Introduction of Kupu past participants (O wai kou inoa, o wai oe)</p> <p>Why are we here</p> <p>Introduction of Imi Na`auao Team</p> <p>Mana‘o on process</p> <p>Share purpose and timeline</p> <p>Q & A</p> <p>11:30 a.m. Start lunch warm up</p> <p>12:00 p.m. Lunch is served</p> <p>1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Hana</p> <p>3:15pm Head to dock</p> <p>3:30pm Leave Moku o Lo‘e</p>	<p>What is your idea of community?</p> <p>What has having a Kupu experience done for you?</p> <p>How has your life changed since being in Kupu?</p> <p>How are you now changing the life of others?</p> <p>What does cultural restoration (e.g. touching land) have to do with our health and wellness?</p> <p>What do you want to get out of this?</p> <p>Where do you see cultural restoration, health and wellness?</p> <p>What clarity can we provide because of what you have done with Kupu to improve āina-based learning?</p> <p>How can we (Kupu) support those of you who are now outside of the Kupu bubble?</p> <p>What are things that drew you to Kupu?</p> <p>How do we capture the strength of the knowledge you received at Kupu?</p> <p>How do we show that that knowledge is transcultural/trans-historical/transformational?</p> <p>How do we assess the quality of the relationship you have with Kupu?</p> <p>How do we show that “aloha” is at the center of any idea?</p> <p>How do we quantify the place-based education you have received from Kupu?</p>

TABLE 2
GAINING ACCESS/ BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OPPORTUNITY #2

Net Shed Dinner Gathering- -Kēwalo-Honolulu, HI Agenda- February 9th, 2018	Discussion Topics and Questions
5:30pm Welcome, Oli	<p>Explain how organizations like Kupu impact youth in terms of increased knowledge about land conservation and culture.</p> <p>Explain the impact organizations like Kupu have on youth in terms of health and wellness.</p> <p>How have ‘āina-based activities impacted the overall wellness of youth and young adults?</p> <p>Explain the relationship between land, culture, health, and well-being.</p> <p>How can we continue to support your continued learning journey? Please list ideas...</p> <p>How has spending time on ‘āina-based activities impacted you?</p> <p>How does touching and being on the land affect an individual’s education and sense of culture?</p>
6:00pm Introductions	
6:30pm Overview and purpose of gathering	
-- include a call out for 20 committed individuals to meet with us for 2 more events	
-- understanding the ‘Imi Na‘auao Process, Hawaiian Knowing and Wellbeing	
-- share questions to consider and discuss over a meal	
7:15pm Dinner	
7:40pm Q & A, record answers	
8:15pm Close	
8:30pm Aloha mai kākou!	

Part 2: Disseminating Research Education

After opportunities for relationship building were made, Kupu alumni were introduced to the concept of analyzing research. Over the summer of 2018 5 Kupu Alumni were trained on how to conceptualize data into themes and utilize the qualitative software program, NVIVO. KUPU Alumni attended 4-5 workshop trainings. The trainings covered content on types of data, conducting content analysis, steps for using Kupu and drawing conclusions from qualitative data (or artifacts).

NVIVO Session #1- May 30th, 2018 (4-5PM)

The goals of the first session were to: 1) measure the impact of KUPU, 2) assess how touching land has significance on culture and education, and 3) determine how touching land has impacted the overall wellness of Native Hawaiian youth and young adults are very clear and specific. This session included an overview of qualitative research to assist Kupu Alumni in locating behaviors and social processes embedded in the data. Alumni were also introduced to the idea of analyzing observation journals and personal interviews from former Kupu alumni as a way to assess the significance of how KUPU Alumni viewed their time touching land, understanding culture, health and wellbeing.

NVIVO Sessions #2-5- May 31st, 2018; June 5th, 2018; June 24th, 2013; July 17th, 2018 (4-5PM)

The goal of the second set of sessions was to: identify how qualitative data could be analyzed using NVIVO. Kupu alumni reviewed specific journals first by reading individual journals and speeches, searching for recurring themes in the data. Then Kupu alumni inputted the data into NVIVO to help with verifying and maintaining accuracy of their results from reading each journal.

Part 3: Undergraduate Course Work Redesign

PUBA 307, Community Health Analysis is an upper level elective course offered at UH West O'ahu, designed to examine health data, health information resources and methods for improving the health of all communities. This course was traditionally taught as a 15-week indoor class, that focused largely on the steps and processes associated with developing community-based projects. Examples of class activities in previous semesters included: community health problem case studies, community-based experiences from the professor or invited guests and project examples from course text. However, what was missing was a connection to the community. This course was desperately in need of being redesigned to include an ongoing community-based research project, with a community partner, for students to complete during the semester.

The course redesign was supported through a Community Engagement and Outreach Scholarship Mini Grant, an initiative funded through the UH West O'ahu Institute of Engaged Research, to support faculty in the development and redesign of courses for student success in scholarship. Redesigning PUBA 307 consisted of providing scaffolded learning that incorporated Kupu, a community group involved with the 'Imi Na'auao Research Project and adding a community focused research framework to the course. By the end of the semester the goal was for students who took the redesigned PUBA 307 Community Health Analysis course to demonstrate the following learning objectives:

1. Analyze the importance of various roles of community organizations that shape population health in Hawaii.
2. Apply the steps in planning a health promotion program using community-based research methods (including concepts of Aloha 'āina and community engagement).
3. Explain the impact of a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomic diverse population as it relates to the health of a community.

The goal of linking UH West O'ahu students with Kupu was also to create a pipeline for sharing among youth about the value of Aloha 'āina practices of health and wellbeing in communities across Hawaii. Future thoughts include the development of a community non-credit course with integrated research curriculum and instruction for community to learn concepts of, Malama 'āina, Aloha 'āina and community based participatory research methods. Overall, the redesign of PUBA 307 allowed for integration of a broader community impact and academic excellence in four ways: 1) solidify social and educational relationships that build and maintain community and pride, 2) promote Aloha 'āina practices centered on the significance that touching land has on health and wellbeing, 3) provide a space for collaboration among UH West O'ahu students, KUPU staff and community members to promote healthy lifestyles, and 4) increase the value in using outdoor spaces to promote concepts of embracing land, culture and building kuleana with students at UH West O'ahu and the broader community to appreciate, love and embrace the environment.

PROJECT FINDINGS

A Peer Mentoring Program Was Established

Once relationship building had occurred, trainings were held and a UH West O'ahu course was redesigned, ideas were provided on plausible next steps for a group of Kupu alumni to get involved in the research process. One of the most applicable and sustainable products of our work was the initiation of a peer research mentoring program in qualitative research. The goal of each workshop training was to identify how qualitative data could be analyzed using NVIVO. Kupu alumni reviewed available data first

by reading artifacts (e.g. individual Kupu graduate journals and speeches), searching for recurring themes in the data. Then, after being fully trained, Kupu alumni inputted the data into NVIVO to help with verifying and maintaining accuracy of the results from reading each artifact. At the conclusion of the trainings, peer researchers self-identified several themes related to cultural restoration and the significance that youth touching land has on culture and education. See a snap shot of the themes below in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1
PEER RESEARCH MENTORING THEMES**



The artifacts that Kupu alumni analyzed included Daily Reflection Journals and Graduation Speeches from participants who had been a part of the Kupu Hawai'i Youth Conservation Corps (HYCC) Community Program.

Daily Reflection Journals

Throughout the course of the 6-month Kupu HYCC Community Program, participants completed daily journals. They were guided by their Team Leaders and used the guidelines in their Participant Handbooks. They were completed at the end of the day and were written at the work sites, in the van, or back at the program location. Participants were typically given 30 minutes to debrief the day as a group and then time to write individually.

Graduation Speeches

Each Kupu HYCC Community Program participant who completes the program must give a speech at their graduation ceremony. The guidelines for their speeches are outlined

in their Participant Handbooks, which are distributed on the first day of the program. The speeches are written solely by the graduates, with editing done by Team Leaders. The editing focuses on grammar rather than content. They are given program time during their final month in the program to brainstorm, write, edit, type, finalize and practice their speeches.

Based on a review of artifacts, the peer research mentors (who were also Kupu Alumni) reviewed 15 Graduation Speeches, 5 Reflections, and 10 Great Stories. Findings revealed that KUPU Alumni largely believed that Kupu had the following:

- 1) A positive impact on the daily routines of their lives, positive changes in self and an increased recognition of purpose in life.
- 2) Opened their eyes to the value of touching land in changing their mindset on education and motivation to improve/ change the current education system.
- 3) An increased effect on their connection to others/family, increase appreciation for life and sharing with others.

Our project demonstrates and supports the idea that there is value in touching land among youth. A review of artifacts from Kupu graduates further demonstrates that the mission of Kupu has been changing the mindset of youth on education and motivation to improve/ change the current education system. Youth want to see more opportunities for education that requires interaction with ‘āina. Moreover, as evidenced by those who were a part of the peer research mentoring program, providing opportunities for touching ‘āina together increases connection to others/family and ultimately raises social consciousness.

Favorite Quotes That Bring Forth Key Highlights and Insights

Kūlia i ka nu‘u

“I came here at first with low expectations of myself, and I doubted that I would make it to graduation because prior to Kupu I had never completed any plans I had made for myself. I had low self-esteem, hung out with the wrong type of people, believing they cared, and followed others with no real sense of who I was as an individual. From the day I joined Kupu until now, I have seen both small and profound changes in my thinking and values. Now I strive to be the best I can, I am persistent even when times are hard, the people I choose to hang out with are pretty positive (probably because I’m almost always hanging around at the Net Shed), and I actually have confidence in the choices I make and in myself as a person.” (Kupu HYCC Community Program Participant 2017)

An increase in self-confidence and self-worth were seen in many participants after successful completion of the Kupu HYCC Community Program. Native Hawaiian health and wellness is improved when connection to ‘āina and community is reestablished. Mental health is often not spoken of because the connection to physical health is so much more obvious, but is important none the less.

I ulu no ka lālā i ke kumu

“A wise team leader once told us that the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago; and the next best time is now. We have truly grasped the essence of that mana’o through the bittersweet satisfaction of makaluhi. This poetic phrase simply translates to “tired eyes”- specifically those of the people who have been working hard on a community project. Experiencing makaluhi and admiring progress made after a hard day’s work has not only grown our relationship stronger to the land, but also with our community members and ultimately, with ourselves.” (Kupu HYCC Community Program Participant, 2016-2017)
Mālama ‘āina work puts the kumu back in kumu. It reminds us of the origins of the word. That without strong roots, a solid foundation and base, the main stalk or kumu would simply be unable to weather the storm. Culture, land, and sea, these have always been our teachers.

‘A ‘ohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho ‘okahi

“When I first started the Kupu HYCC program, I thought I would never reach my goal of getting a C-BASE diploma. I thought I was just going to fail and disappoint myself again. I was scared of failure. My mother always said that failure was a part of success. I didn’t listen to her.” (Kupu HYCC Community Program Participant, 2017)

Cultural restoration and revitalization of our ‘āina, that which feeds us, has the capacity to not only positively impact the ‘āina and our lāhui, but also to powerfully change the individuals caring for their communities. Not only do these individuals see their environment differently, but they view themselves differently. After completing a six-month program with Kupu’s HYCC Community Program members spoke differently about the importance of education and their ability to be successful in educational settings.

‘Ike aku, ‘ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai, pela iho la ka nohona ‘ohana

“The staff and peers here became my family. They filled this gaping hole I have had inside my heart for such a long time.” (Kupu HYCC Community Program Participant, 2017-2018)

Mālama ‘āina work teaches its students about the reciprocal nature of life. Upon completing their Kupu experience members spoke of an increased sense of community within the program and a better understanding of what it takes to build and maintain a connection to others. The vast majority of Kupu’s HYCC Community Program participants have at least one and in many times several of the following as part of their reality

- Incarcerated parent or family member
- Houseless or in and off of the streets
 - Substance abuse in the household
 - Domestic violence in the household
 - Deceased parent or guardian
 - In the foster care system
 - Single parent household

Their experience of caring for and being cared for by the ‘āina allowed them a safe place to practice building positive relationships and the potential to end a powerfully negative trajectory they were simply born into.

DISCUSSION

We found both strengths and weaknesses in our project. We identified the following three (3) strengths of our project.

Pride

Organizations like Kupu provide the infrastructure and space for youth to acknowledge, accept, understand their health and wellness in order to help with openness - often times indirectly.

Identity

To feel connected is to feel that you belong- Organizations like Kupu provide space for youth to create relationships with people, land, and themselves. Relationship affects one’s health and wellbeing. If you ask an alumni what their greatest moments were during the program, chances are it involved building new relationships.

Purpose

Experiences with ‘āina provide alumni with the confidence to pursue their passions. They find a sense of purpose in participating in culturally significant activities, in seeing their home differently, seeing their surroundings as a place of wealth.

We Identified the Following Two (2) Weaknesses from Our Project.

First, we need a plan to compare the ideas found in this work on the value of touching land among youth to existing public policies that are being implemented elsewhere, and compare them to legislative proposals that were not enacted. Second, we would generally like to look at addressing state laws to create better pathways for Kupu alums to work in conservation jobs with the state.

CONCLUSIONS (Our Kuleana)

Lessons Learned

“A wise team leader once told us that the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago; and the next best time is now. We have truly grasped the essence of that mana’o through the bittersweet satisfaction of makaluhi. This poetic phrase simply translates to “tired eyes”- specifically those of the people who have been working hard on a community project. Experiencing makaluhi and admiring progress made after a hard day’s work has not only grown our relationship stronger to the land, but also with our community members and ultimately, with ourselves.” (Kupu HYCC Community Program member, 2017)

As with the statement above, there are many ways of knowing. The challenge is being expansive rather than restrictive in how we understand what we see, hear, feel, and learn through our research. What questions are asked matters. Where the questions are asked matters. When the questions are asked matters. How the questions are asked matters. Who asks the questions matters. Why the questions are asked matters. We were intentional about the process of questioning in order to understand how ‘āina impacts Hawaiian wellbeing, culture, and education in this project. We also reflected on past questions and looked at how we can improve our questioning to better capture the life-changing experiences that doing mālama ‘āina work has on our young adults.

In essence we learned that Research is better together. Having a hui of alumni researchers led by an experienced mentor can create community in what can be an isolating data-filled world. We learned that ‘āina does not care about your past, who you are, or where you have come from, it cares about what you do now. It is our hope that this work will propel others to work together to address community concerns now.

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