

George H. Balazs

Preserving Hawai'i's Unique Natural Wonders

*The Nature Conservancy
protects "islands of life"
in a sea of change*

BY PAT PITZER

Millions of years ago, fiery volcanoes emerged from the sea to form these islands. Separated from the nearest continent by 2,500 miles, Hawai'i is the most isolated land on the face of the globe. Gradually life forms from far away, carried by the currents of wind and ocean, found their way to these shores.

Here, in supreme isolation, plants, birds and animals evolved into an amazing array of new and different forms unlike those found anywhere else on Earth.

In widely varied habitats throughout Hawai'i, groups of species clustered together in natural communities—each an "island of life" within a larger island.

The primordial native ecosystem remained undisturbed until some 1,500 years ago, when Polynesian voyagers sailed their double-hulled canoes vast distances to settle here, bringing with them new plants and animals. The isolated habitat began to be altered and Hawai'i's native plants and birds began to be diminished. Following the re-discovery of the islands by Capt. James Cook in 1778, an acceleration of extinctions began that continues today.

The Nature Conservancy of Hawai'i is an organization dedicated to stemming the tide of extinctions and preserving natural "islands of life" amid a sea of change. It is a chapter of the private, nonprofit, international Nature Conservancy, devoted to saving natural areas with rare and endangered plants and animals. Maintaining environmental beauty is a secondary benefit; the primary goal is protecting diversity of life.

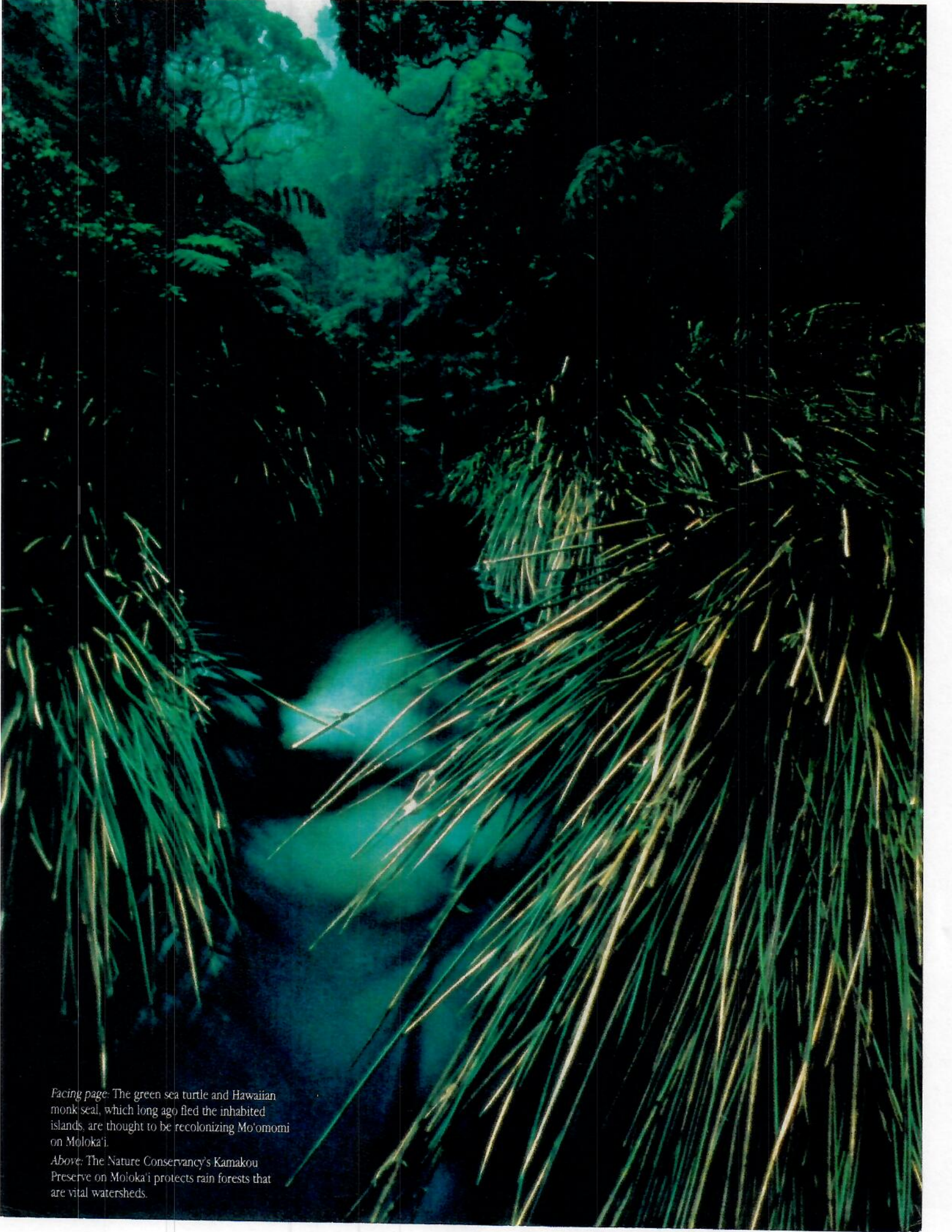
Because Hawai'i has more imperiled species than anywhere else, The Nature Conservancy has made the Islands a top national conservation priority. Although Hawai'i has only a tiny fraction of the nation's land area, it is the home of 27 percent of all endangered species of plants and birds in the U.S. Of the extinctions recorded in the nation over the past two centuries, 72 percent have been Hawaiian species.

Much has already been lost, but Hawai'i has much more to lose.

Scientists have identified approximately 150 different kinds of natural communities of native species still existing in Hawai'i. They predict that within the next 10 to 20 years more than half are in danger of being lost forever unless action is taken immediately to protect them.

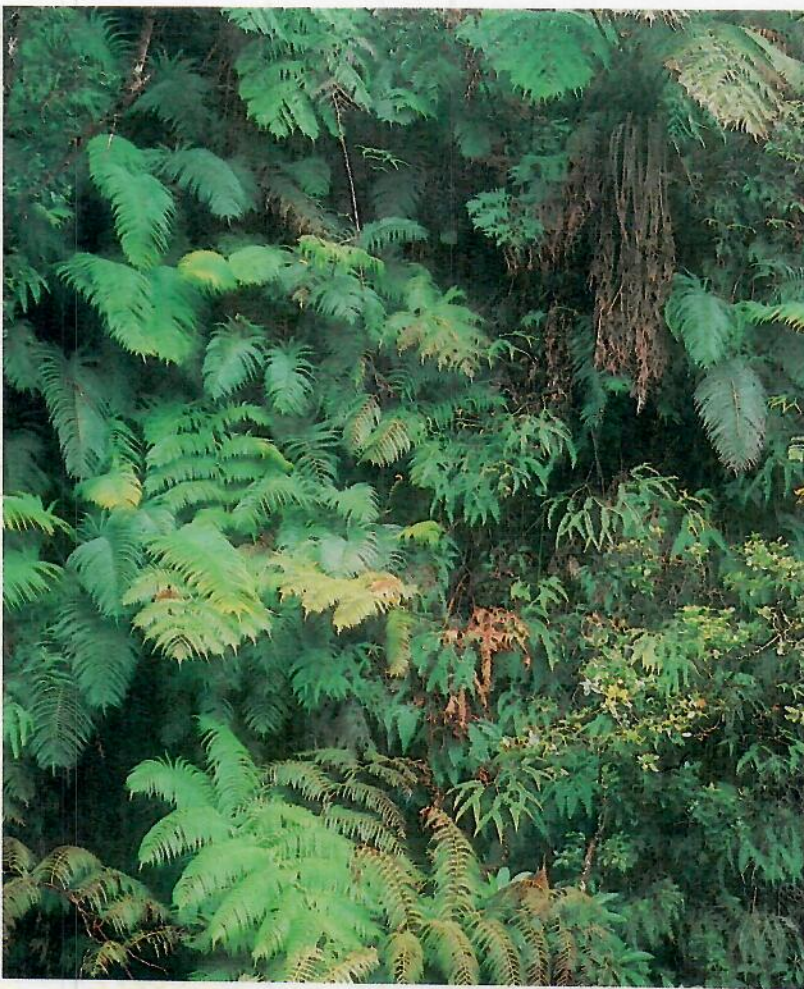
This urgent need spurred the Nature Conservancy of Hawai'i to launch the most extensive conservation project ever seen here, the "Islands of Life" campaign. The recently completed three-year campaign succeeded in raising \$10 million for the acquisition and stewardship of nature preserves on each of the major islands.

The Nature Conservancy last fall published a book, *Hawai'i: The Islands of Life*, celebrating the rich diversity



Facing page: The green sea turtle and Hawaiian monk seal, which long ago fled the inhabited islands, are thought to be recolonizing Mo'omomi on Moloka'i.

Above: The Nature Conservancy's Kamakou Preserve on Moloka'i protects rain forests that are vital watersheds.



David Muench

Above: Ferns grow in lush profusion under the trees in Hawai'i rain forests.

Above, right: A delicate blossom is that of *ma'o*, the Hawaiian cotton plant that produces a valuable hybrid with commercial cotton, underscoring the value of natural diversity.

Right: Clouds on the ridges send waterfalls cascading down valley walls at Kīpahulu, Maui.



Peter Menzel



David Muench

of our natural lands and native species. The book is filled with stunning nature photographs, including the ones on these pages. The fascinating text is by Gavan Daws, noted author of several books about Hawai'i, including the best-selling history of the Islands, *Shoal of Time*.

Hawai'i: The Islands of Life, priced at \$24.95, is available at bookstores throughout the state, or directly from the Nature Conservancy of Hawai'i, 1116 Smith St., Honolulu 96817. With the purchase of each book, the Conservancy offers a year's free membership. Proceeds go toward protecting the Islands' natural heritage.

The book showcases Hawai'i's spectacular scenic beauty and profound contrasts, ranging from lush tropical rain forests to sunswept coastal dunes to the world's most active volcanoes, still adding new land to the Islands. Extremes are found here—the wettest spot on Earth (Mt. Wai'ale'ale on Kaua'i), the world's tallest sea cliffs (on Moloka'i's North Shore) and the largest mountain mass (Mauna Loa on the island of Hawai'i).

Matching the extraordinary variation of the land is the diversity of living things that are unique in the world. Before humans set foot on the Islands, only two mammals—a bat and a monk seal—found their way here, but birds, snails and insects abounded, and native plants evolved into thousands of new species. Humans, in their zeal to develop the Islands, have taken their toll, and so have plants and animals introduced by man and now rampant in the wild.

Beyond the basic desire to protect natural diversity, there are other compelling reasons to preserve endangered species. Who knows what their potential medical value or other use might be? Once a plant becomes