



Advertiser photo by Jan TenBruggencate

Koichi Masaki: "If they destroy these birds, what will happen?"

A Kauai old-timer on Kaula tuna

By Jan TenBruggencate

Advertiser Kauai Bureau

LIHUE — Koichi Masaki remembers fishing around Kaula Island in the 1930s, seeing the seals come alive with the birds that nested there, and seeing the Hawaiian monk seals basking on the shelf along the island's steep sides.

In those days, an automatic lighthouse operated on the small island's summit, warning passing ships. It was closed after World War II.

Masaki, once the owner of the largest commercial fishing boat on Kauai, caught tuna trolling around the island and hauled bottom fish up until they loaded up the boat.

He remembers finding a reef the charts didn't recognize. Some folks still call it Masaki Reef. It's a couple of miles from Kaula, with deep water all around it, and comes up to within 2 feet or so of the surface.

Masaki discovered it when he kept catching shallow-water fish, ulua, while trolling in open ocean. He went back and forth until he pinned down its location.

When the Coast Guard couldn't locate it, they

Old-timer's lament and bombing

took Masaki aboard their boat and had him pinpoint it.

Masaki first went fishing in 1914. He had his first boat, a 32-footer, in 1916. But he didn't start fishing as far out as Kaula, as far beyond Niihau as Niihau is beyond Kauai, until 1928, when he had a boat he felt was big enough for going so far from home.

The action is past now. Masaki, 85, hasn't had a boat for years. The Kauai commercial fishing fleet, once 38 boats strong and led by Masaki's 52-footer, Seagull, is gone.

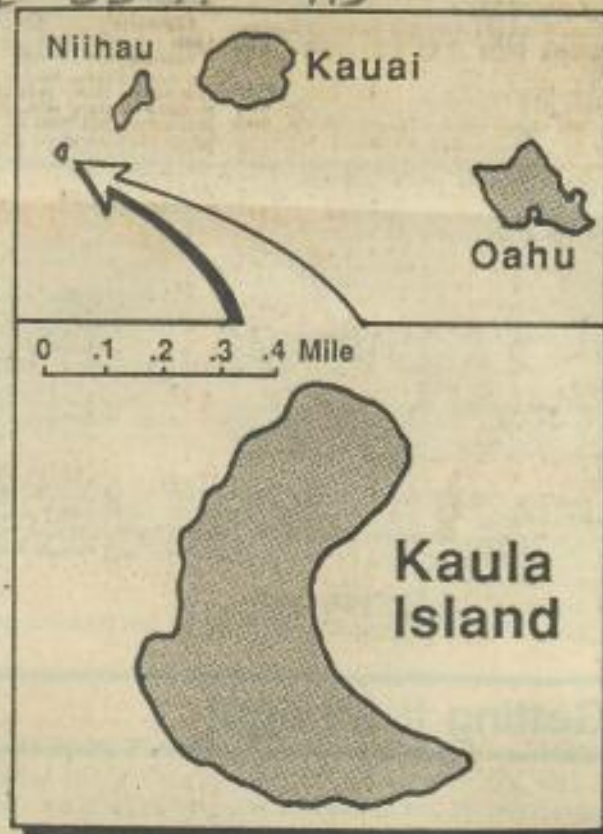
And besides, the fish aren't there like they used to be, he said.

He blames that in part on the Navy and its use of Kaula as a bombing target dating back to the early 1950s. When the bombs started dropping, the tuna abandoned Kauai waters, he said.

"If you go (fishing off) Niihau when they bomb that island, you can't catch one tuna. You can feel the blast 20 miles away," Masaki said.

Kaula is a volcanic tuff cone, a semicircle of land that lies 21 miles off Niihau. The island is 0.4 of a square mile in area, 2 miles in circum-

See Old-timer's on Page A-6



Advertiser map

Kaula Island lies 21 miles off Niihau.

Old-timer's lament about

From Page A-3

ference and 550 feet tall at its highest point.

When he heard Honolulu city officials had proposed bringing Kaula under their jurisdiction on the strength of an attorney general's opinion, Masaki got mad. He fears Honolulu would let the Navy have its way, while Kauai County, being closer, can exercise more control.

Navy sources here said they generally don't use live ammunition on the island any more, but could not speak for other branches of the military. Masaki said non-explosive bombs help, but still aren't right.

In addition to the damage to the fishery, the bombing damages the birds that nest on Kaula.

"If they destroy these birds — these birds only lay one egg each year — if you deplete them, what will happen? They know where the school of fish is. Without these birds, fishermen can't find the school, and our tuna fishery will go out of business," he said.

Masaki has already been lobbying with county authorities to fight to keep jurisdiction over Kaula. The island is of great importance to the fishing industry, and even though that industry is in a state of ruin on Kauai today, it could come back. The island needs it, the old-timer said.

Kaula, he said, is Hawaii property that was

Neighbor Island News

turned over in 1924 to the federal government as a Coast Guard reservation. The federal government in 1952 began letting the Navy bomb the island and, in 1985, turned it over to the Navy. But nobody ever got the state's approval.

Masaki believes the state should take the island back, stop any bombing and make it a wildlife sanctuary, letting the birds flourish so they can guide the way to the fish once again.

Masaki has been a firebrand for years. He is a small man, with a deeply creased face and scarred fingers. His papery, tanned skin has seen plenty of salt and sun. Yet he is active, energetic, intense.

His favorite subject is fishing and the lack of government support for it. Conservation efforts are often misplaced and counterproductive, he said. And the state, if it cares at all about the fishing industry, should create a separate department of fisheries, Masaki said.

Between the outbursts about government and the way it has let the industry decline, Masaki is reflective.

Kaula tuna

He was a fisherman who used no compass to navigate. He judged his course by the wind and the movement of the waves, he said.

His Seagull was the first commercial fishing boat in Kewalo Basin with an English name. He chose the name because seagulls help find fish, he said. A later boat was Mermaid, for the same reason.

In those days, there were more fish in Hawaiian waters than you could sell, he said.

"We had surplus fish. We went after tuna because the price was better. You didn't put your line out close to shore because you could fill up your boat with shoreline fish and you would have no more room," he said.

"That's the way it was, then. Today, Kauai has no fishing vessel to catch the long-line tuna. The traditional fishermen, their grandsons quit fishing. There is no support from the state," he said.