Land of the Wayfarers

For centuries, Polynesian navigators trained at Mahukona. Now a new generation is finding the way.

People in Hawai'i "talk story." Funny story. Chicken-skin story. Mythical story. The pidgin phrase, though, hardly captures the profound knowledge and kuleana (responsibility) the stories of Mahukona carry. Here, people *hold* story, bridging generations and epic distances, preserving the past while navigating toward the future—one shaped by stewardship, sustainability and collective action. For the families rooted in Mahukona, on Hawai'i Island's parched Kohala coast, mālama 'āina (caring for the land) is not merely a phrase; it's a way of life.

The stories told in Mahukona (literally, "leeward vapor") are potent. Guided by the stars, sun and moon, by ocean currents and flight paths of seabirds, ancient voyagers sailed thousands of miles from throughout Polynesia to Ko'a Heiau Holomoana, the navigational temple located here. Though long-distance voyaging between Hawai'i and the rest of Polynesia had ceased before Western contact, the descendants of Mahukona preserved stories of a tradition that had been mostly lost in Hawai'i by the time Europeans arrived in the eighteenth century.

Or almost lost: In the early 1970s a cultural revival known as the Hawaiian Renaissance washed through

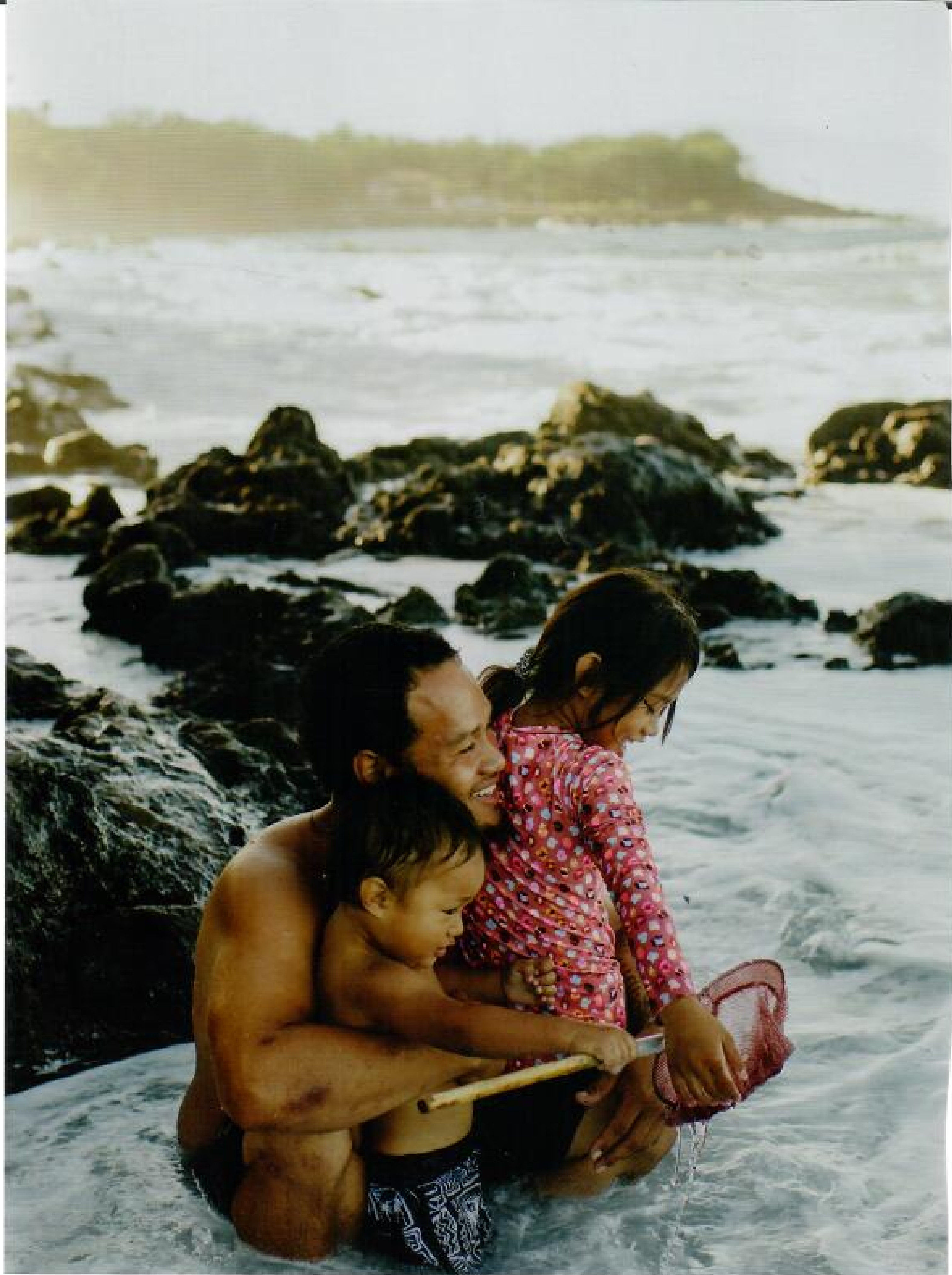
For centuries, families descended from Hawai'i's last line of ancient voyagers have stewarded Ko'a Heiau Holomoana, the navigational heiau (temple) at Mahukona. "Today, canoes pursuing the art of noninstrumental navigation all stop here to honor this heiau," says master navigator Chadd 'Ōnohi Paishon, seen at the heiau above and on pages 34–35. On page 36, lineal descendant Kama'alea Emeliano-Solomon plays with his children Leo and Kauanani in the tidepools of Mahukona.

the Islands. Hawaiians revived 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), hula and oli (chants), traditional farming and land management—and voyaging. A handful of visionaries set out to design, build and sail a wa'a kaulua (traditional double-hulled voyaging canoe) to prove that their Polynesian ancestors crossed the Pacific intentionally, guided only by nature. Naysayers abounded. Academics dissented. But the visionaries persevered, founding the Polynesian Voyaging Society in 1973 to save this nearly extinct cultural practice. When the canoe they built, *Hōkūle'a*, sailed from Hawai'i to Tahiti in 1976 without the use of modern technology, it proved that wayfinding worked and carried that wave of cultural pride to the rest of Polynesia.

But the kahu of Ko'a Heiau Holomoana, the lineal descendants responsible for its safekeeping, already knew it worked: Oral histories passed down through generations said so. "The navigational heiau was always in my grandma Marie Solomon's stories, her mo'olelo," says Hinano Lewis, eldest of the Solomon 'ohana, who have stewarded the heiau for six generations; Lewis herself is a lineal descendant from the Paliku line of navigators, Hawai'i's last known voyaging apprentices. "Stories about Ko'a Heiau Holomoana started coming out in the 1980s, when this whole area was going to be developed into resorts, including Mahukona. That's when Grandma Marie, Grandpa Sonny and the rest of my family got really involved protecting this place and its sacred sites."

In ancient times, children were chosen at birth to learn the art of wayfinding. So it was with the last male from the Paliku line of navigators, who began his education at Ko'a Heiau Holomoana, sometime around first Western contact. His teachers, kūpuna (elders) who safeguarded the heiau, taught their charges how to navigate, but also to honor the land, ocean and traditions so that they may be preserved for future generations. Becoming a wayfinder is no easy task, and the young navigator had to pass many tests before earning the right to voyage. It's said that he got tangled in the mess of wind and currents crossing the infamously turbulent 'Alenuihāhā Channel on the way to Kaho'olawe and failed the test. Instead, his descendants joke, he took up Kohala's second-best profession: sweet potato farming.

Passed down by Auntie Marie's great-great-grandfather, likely sometime in the mid-1800s, the story of the last navigator was held kapu (secret), hidden from missionaries and sugar bosses, from World War II strategists who used the bluff as a lookout, from developers with dream schemes of golf courses and condominiums running along the coast. "For Hawaiians, certain places are very sacred," says Kealoha Sugiyama, born and raised in Mahukona back in its post-contact heyday as a sugar port. "If they felt the time and place was not right for the heiau to be exposed, they wouldn't say anything."



TOP / **Loli'i Barron (left) and Nāke'u Hudgins, the next generation of stewards and voyagers, freshen up lei offerings at Mahukona.**

BOTTOM / **One of Mahukona's trails, formerly a railway, is now protected by a recent land purchase that will preserve the area for future generations.**

AT LEFT / **Shae Kamaka'ala of Hawai'i Land Trust plants an 'ulu (breadfruit) tree as part of the restoration effort at Mahukona.**

And they didn't, until that magic moment when circumstances and community activism converged to help save both traditional navigation and the cultural practices linked to Mahukona. "Things don't happen when you want them to happen. It's never up to us," says master navigator, canoe builder and original *Hōkūle'a* crew member Shorty Bertelmann. "It takes patience to wait for that window. It's a feeling or spirit, that collective coming together when everything is in place—that's when these things are revealed."

By the time artist-historian Herb Kawainui Kāne drafted the plans for *Hōkūle'a* from a scattering of petroglyphs and a few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drawings, the knowledge of voyaging canoe design and building had died out in Hawai'i. Once *Hōkūle'a* was built, no one quite knew how to sail it. Kāne, along with a handful of other, now-venerated Hawaiian voyagers, including Clay and Shorty Bertelmann, Nainoa Thompson, Chadd Paishon and others, were hell-bent on learning.

"We looked all over the world for someone with that traditional knowledge—how to use the stars and ocean and elements of land and universe to navigate. In our generation there was no one with that knowledge," says Bertelmann. Then one day, an unimposing man from Satawal, Micronesia, walked into a room of would-be voyagers. Chalk it up to coincidence or, in the Hawaiian worldview, the intercession of unseen ancestors. Regardless, the time was right: Mau Piailug, an old-school master navigator, crossed paths with the *Hōkūle'a* 'ohana just as they were struggling to reinvent noninstrumental navigation. "Mau was afraid," recalls Bertelmann, who was at that first meeting. "He saw the tradition dying out on his island and wanted that knowledge to be passed on." Which he did: After *Hōkūle'a*'s successful voyage to Tahiti legitimized traditional wayfinding, Papa Mau, as he is affectionately known, continued teaching Hawaiian voyagers, with five achieving the status of *pwo*, master navigators.

Two of Mau's students, Shorty and his late brother Clay Bertelmann, went

"Preserving the traditional ways is about the strength of our ancestors, the strength of our origins and the strength of our children," says canoe builder and navigator Shorty Bertelmann. "That was always the promise." Today, that promise is kept by Kohala residents like Emeliano-Solomon and his son Leo, seen above.

on to establish Nā Kālai Wa'a (canoe builders), an educational nonprofit and navigation academy, in 1993 to perpetuate voyaging traditions for generations to come. Shortly thereafter they began constructing *Makali'i*, a traditional double-hulled voyaging canoe, to serve as a floating classroom.

This hunger for ancestral knowledge breathed new life into Mahukona. And the Solomon family was ready: All this time, Auntie Marie and Uncle Sonny had continued passing down stories of the heiau while hosting visits and school programs; their daughter, Patti Ann Solomon, the first woman navigator from the Paliku line, began lobbying for a preservation plan. Together, they introduced Ko'a Heiau Holomoana to Papa Mau, the canoe builders and Nā Kālai Wa'a. Papa Mau shed light on the mystery of how the heiau worked, how it pointed the way to Tahiti, the ancestral home of Hawaiian voyagers. The heiau, the hallowed land on which it sits and the voyaging tradition it guides, were back online.

From all accounts, Auntie Patti—Mahukona caretaker and voyager—was larger than life, a funny, street-smart spitfire who dedicated her life to preserving Mahukona and nurturing the traditions around the heiau. "Auntie Patti's role, her work protecting this place, was very big," says Keone Emeliano, 'āina steward and educator for Hawai'i Land Trust (HILT). "I am so grateful for her and her 'ohana. If not for her, I wouldn't be here, and the future of Mahukona would be a big question mark."

"Auntie Patti's goal was to protect Mahukona and the importance it has for the Kohala way of life," Lewis recalls of her mother's mission. With a voyager's courage and tenacity, Auntie Patti worked tirelessly to preserve the land. But purchasing 642 acres, including some of Hawai'i's most desirable coastal real estate, spanning six ahupua'a (traditional land divisions) seemed out of the question. For eight years in a row, the Kohala community presented an offer financed by the Hawai'i County Public Access, Open Space and Natural Resources Preservation fund (2 percent of the county's property taxes go to this fund) but failed to convince private developers to sell. Despite their determination, the purchase of these ancestral lands, containing one of Hawai'i's oldest and most active heiau, was in the doldrums.

Enter HILT, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to protecting and stewarding lands that sustain Hawai'i. Shae Kamaka'ala, director of 'āina protection for HILT, was tasked in 2020 to "try and figure out why this place is so important to the community." Initial inquiries led her to the canoe *Makali'i* and Nā Kālai Wa'a, which led her to the Solomons. "The Solomon 'ohana provided a sense of clarity and hope for the path forward," Kamaka'ala recalls. "I believe that by passing down these ancient stories from generation to generation and waiting for the right time to share them, the Solomons contributed to Mahukona's accumulated mana—an energy that never dissipates. That's why we can feel their presence today."

Nā Kālai Wa'a, families and descendants were invited to Mahukona 'Ohana Day to help HILT better understand why this place and the practices it supports are so critical to preserve. "There are families here that continue to pass down mo'olelo within their 'ohana. They speak of watching [King] Kamehameha grow up. In Kohala, people speak of the beautiful and deep respect they have for this place," says Kamaka'ala. "So it's really about listening and staying true to the place and the people who hold relationships to the seen and unseen, to birds and trees, to practices like navigation." HILT sought permission from the families of Mahukona to work toward a land purchase that honors those relationships. Forces slipped into place, ushering in a new era in Hawaiian stewardship and voyaging.

HILT, in partnership with Nā Kālai Wa'a, federal, state and county agencies, and the larger Mahukona community, undertook the monumental task of mapping the 642 acres slated for preservation, identifying hundreds of sacred sites within its boundaries and documenting the cultural practices tied to the land. Surveys for US Fish and Wildlife grants were conducted to identify endangered species and protect their habitat. Kohala families weighed in on daily use of the land, from fishing practices to learning to swim. "This is every day, this is our life. Mahukona is where we come when we need guidance or want to visit with those who came before us," says Kailin Kim, 2009 *Hōkūle'a* crew member, the youngest in its history at 17. "We feel and see them in all things. That's why Mahukona is so special for our families. By sharing this space, we are connected to all the generations that came before, our kūpuna, their babies and their babies," she says, bouncing 1-year-old Kekeha on her hip.

HILT mounted a campaign to raise $20 million, coupled with a massive community organizing effort to secure funding and argue for protecting Mahukona. They found endangered endemic species and sacred sites. They gained new knowledge, including an ingenious ancient water catchment system using concave rocks. The kūpuna stories living with Kohala families were documented. It worked, the sellers climbed aboard and the community's hard-fought and long-awaited goal for the Mahukona Navigational and Ecological Complex became a reality in December 2023.

Future plans are lofty, and the work ahead will be hard, but Auntie

Ask anyone born and raised in Kohala where they learned to swim, and the answer is inevitably Mahukona. "The first time Kekeha entered the ocean was here. She was eight weeks old," says Kailin Kim (right), seen here with Kamaka'ala watching their children romp in the surf. The land purchase, says Kamaka'ala, "is a beautiful and rare opportunity to protect the heart, soul and spirit of this place."

Patti, who passed away in 2019, leaving a hole in Kohala's heart, wouldn't have had it any other way. Habitat restoration for at least thirteen endangered, threatened or rare endemic species, including the 'ōpe'ape'a (Hawaiian hoary bat), the 'ua'u (Hawaiian petrel) and 'iliahi aloe (coastal sandalwood) is already underway. "Periodically, youth from our local basketball program clean out kiawe [mesquite] trees and invasive grasses, and every week high school students do volunteer stewardship work," says Emeliano. "In 2024 we'll have volunteer days on the third Sunday of every month so people can learn about and help restore Mahukona." The land purchase also contributes to four miles of contiguous protected coastline between Lapakahi State Historical Park and Kapa'a Beach Park.

For the voyaging 'ohana, the land purchase and new complex mean the heiau and the wayfinding traditions it supports will be preserved. "Ko'a Heiau Holomoana was a school of navigation in the past, and it continues to be a school today," says pwo navigator and executive director of Nā Kālai Wa'a, Chadd Paishon. "We honor our Mahukona kūpuna by studying and perpetuating this knowledge that has been within our culture for generations." In addition to teaching navigation aboard *Makali'i*, Nā Kālai Wa'a has programs for traditional canoe building and restoration; reviving and perpetuating Native food systems; and ocean stewardship.

The fragility of Mahukona and the cultural significance of the heiau require that visitors respect the site and tread gently—if at all. "The heiau is very sacred. You have to have a meaningful reason to go," says Emeliano. "Even living here all my life, I didn't go there because I had no reason to be there." Indeed, in his capacity as a HILT steward, Emeliano has visited only four times.

"Keeping our culture alive, thriving and strong by passing down these cherished stories and traditions—that's the real opportunity here," says Kamaka'ala. Expanded educational programming for visitors is a possibility in the future, as long as it doesn't interfere with Mahukona's living cultural practices. "It's only a little spot on the coastline, but the conservation purchase means we can manage and protect it and continue to learn," says Shorty Bertelmann. "I know the ancestors are going to be happy." **hh**

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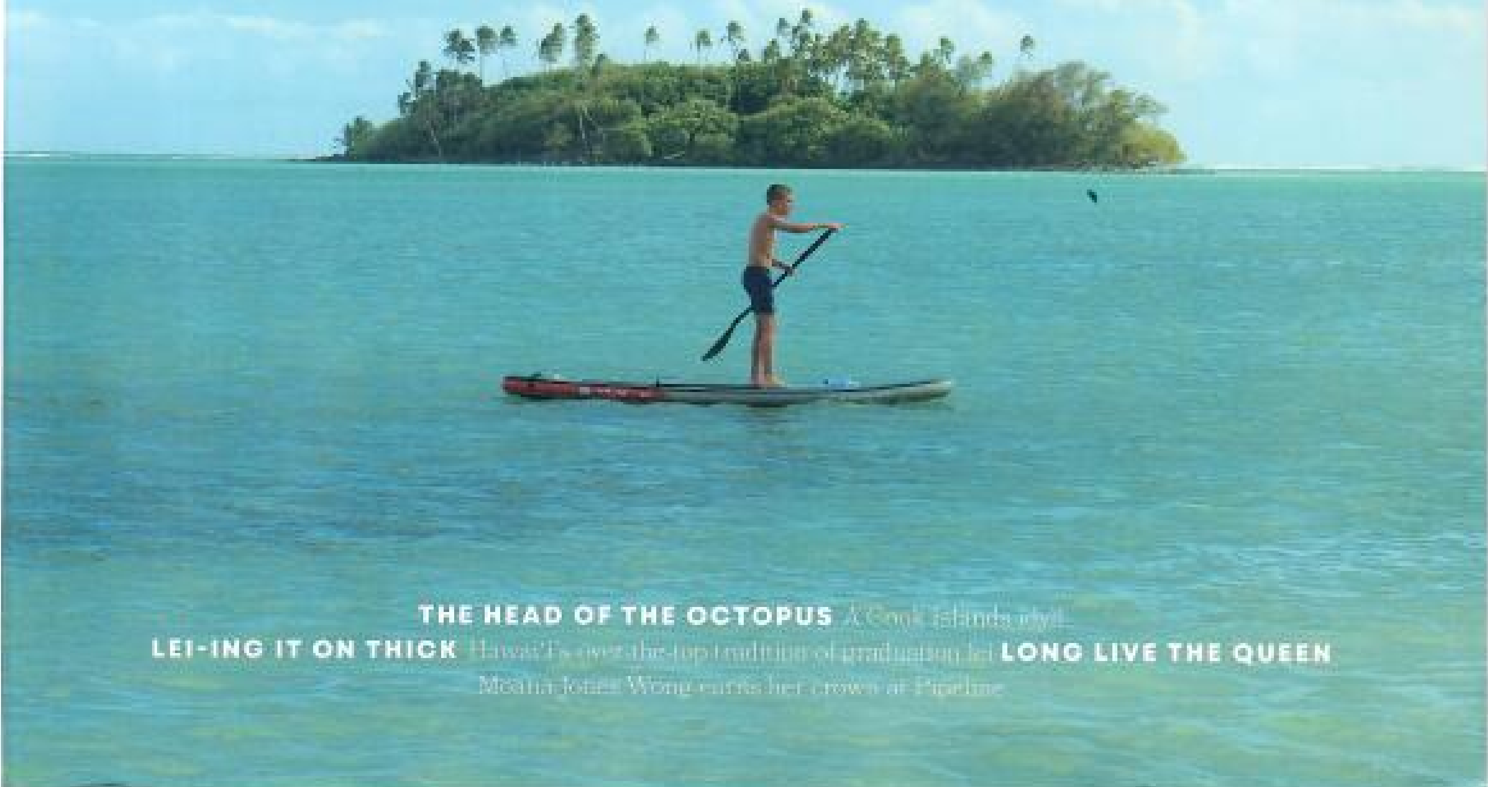

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