



Setting A New Precedent: Communities Lead Cetacean Stranding Responses On Hawai'i Island

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On Sunday, July 14th, members of the community of Leleiwi were called to action by a baby palaoa that stranded at Ka'iliwai that afternoon. The stranding response was a ground-breaking collaborative partnership between community members, Kia'i Kanaloa, Department of Aquatic Resources (DAR), and NOAA Fisheries. NOAA Fisheries, which leads national marine mammal stranding response, has formed a partnership with Kia'i Kanaloa, a multi-island network of Hawaiian cultural practitioners who care for marine animals, to respond to stranded cetaceans on Hawai'i island.

Around noon on the 14th, Kia'i Kanaloa and NOAA began receiving reports of a small Kogia (pygmy or dwarf sperm whale) swimming alone near the shore of Waiuli (Richardson Beach Park) in Hilo. Kogia are a palaoa (whale) species that spend their lives in deep, offshore water. They can dive to at least 1,000 feet and spend very little time at the ocean's surface. Finding a Kogia swimming close to shore is not normal, and it usually means something is wrong.

This Kogia was determined to be a calf and had no mother anywhere in sight, which is also very abnormal. The calf appeared weak and had multiple scratches, likely from scraping against rocks along the shoreline. Not long after the first sighting at Waiulu, the calf stranded at Ka'iliwai, a small bay between Waiuli & Leleiwi Beach Park.

While monitoring the situation, kia'i (caretakers) of that area, Hui Ho'oleimaluō, ocean safety officials, and DAR officers ensured the palaoa was afforded its space and was allowed to progress on its own accord without additional human stress. Generally, when a dolphin or whale comes on shore or strands, it is usually because it is critically sick or injured, often near the end of its life, and can no longer support itself

to swim properly in the ocean. Calves are especially vulnerable as they cannot survive without their mother and mother's milk. The Kogia calf passed away naturally soon after it stranded. The collective community effort helped provide a resting space for the calf to transition with less stress.

Whales and dolphins are a form of Kanaloa, genealogically connected to native Hawaiians and held in high regard. As such, once the calf passed it was taken to another location where initial death rites rituals were performed for the palaoa. A necropsy to determine the cause of death is almost always performed in strandings like these. In this stranding event, there was consultation with NOAA Fisheries, its research partners, Kia'i Kanaloa, and community members; a necropsy was not performed at the community's request. Instead, an external examination was conducted solely by community members and DAR officers under the guidance of Kia'i Kanaloa. The critical scientific information about the calf was given to NOAA Fisheries, which will be entered into a national database so that the community of stranding responders can learn from patterns of strandings over time. Following the examination, additional rituals, including birthing a name for the calf, were conducted as the palaoa, Holokaihumua, was prepared for a sea burial.



'O Holokaihumua ka inoa o ke akua. PC: Kia'i Kanaloa

The week prior, members of Kia'i Kanaloa led the response and examination of a spinner dolphin, Haukālua, who stranded at La'aloa Bay in Kona on July 9th. The genuine collaborative effort of these responses sets a vision and precedence for the future stranding responses, where communities are empowered to reactivate their ancestral connections with and kuleana for these Kanaloa with the support of NOAA Fisheries.

It took the support of many community members, including members of Kia'i Kanaloa, Ocean Safety, DAR, and DOCARE. Kia'i Kanaloa looks forward to continuing training of local kia'i in our communities and to continue to advocate for the appropriate care of our Kanaloa.

As we navigate the future of these responses, we remember something important: our kuleana to the ocean and its inhabitants. Both Hawaiian science and Western science recognize the importance of these Kanaloa forms as messengers that give us insight into the state of our nearshore and deep sea waters. Understanding Kanaloa strandings in a manner that authentically honors the Kanaloa for the status they hold in the moana (ocean) and kanaka (human) realms will take a collective group effort to navigate. The support of more localized relationship building and capacity building on Hawai'i island will be crucial in this journey to care, protect, and learn from all the Kanaloa forms here in Hawai'i.

Ola I ke au a Kanaloa!

Life to the realm of Kanaloa!



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