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# The search for Hawaii's missing island

There's no consensus on where it might be.



The crew of the double-hulled canoe Hokulea searched for Moku Papapa in 2003.  
Polynesian Voyaging Society

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

Oct 18, 2024



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There's a Hawaiian island that has been missing for over 200 years. It is illustrated on historical maps and referred to in old ship journals. It's written about in early newspaper articles and spoken of in Hawaiian chants and stories.

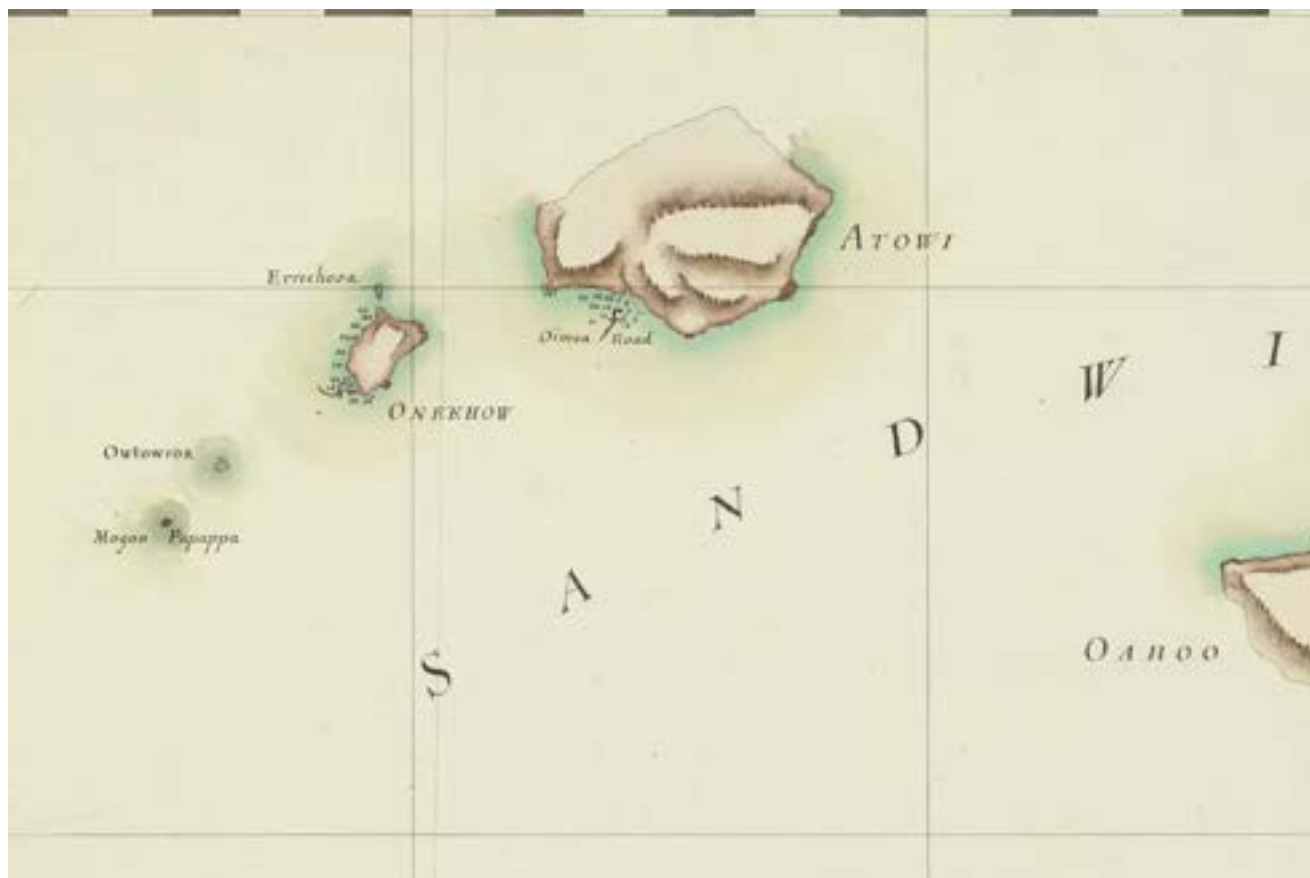
Moku Papapa is somewhere southwest of Niihau, around the small uninhabited island of Kaula, but its exact location is a mystery.

In the 18th century, British explorers searched for the island at the end of Capt. Cook's

third voyage in 1779, about a month after Cook was killed. After hearing about the island from Native Hawaiians, the ship's new captain, Charles Clerke, directed the ship southwest of Niihau hoping to find Moku Papapa.

The island's name literally means a "low, flat island," and so it was described to the explorers as being on an even level with the sea. "We were told by the natives, lay in that direction, about five hours fail [sail] from Tahoorā [Kaula]," another captain on the ship recounted later in "A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean."

During their search, a canoe with 10 Hawaiian men came upon their ship. They were from Kauai, on their way to Kaula to capture birds, then on to Moku Papapa the next day for turtles. Clerke chose not to follow the Hawaiians, and they parted ways. After two days, he and his crew gave up on their search, unable to locate the island.



This 18th century French map of the "Sandwich Islands" was recreated from an officer's map in the Cook expedition. The explorers spelled it as "Mogoo Papappa." Above it are Kaula, Niihau and Kauai.



## Moku Papapa is real

Pieced together from varying sources, some descriptions about Moku Papapa are consistent: It is very small. Often, maps list it as a "rock." It's also southwest of Niihau (the restricted island west of Kauai) in the vicinity of Kaula, a small island known for its large number of seabirds and that is currently being bombed by the U.S. Navy.

The distance that Moku Papapa is from Kaula, however, varies depending on the source. Some say 3 miles from Kaula. Others, such as in the book "Niihau: The Traditions of an Hawaiian Island," written by the late Niihau resident Moses Keale, cite it as being halfway to Tahiti: "Motu [Moku] Papapa is on the other side of Kaula Rock towards the southwest from Niihau, halfway to the island of Tahiti, according to Tutu Kai."

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An 1870 newspaper article, written about a century after Cook's voyage, offers coordinates for Moku Papapa's location, placing it 40 miles west-southwest of Kaula. To make things even more puzzling, the article described the island as being tall. "In shape it resembles a sugar-loaf, and is about two hundred feet high, a peak rising apparently out of deep water," the article said. "Although marked doubtful on some recent charts, there is no doubt of its existence. Its name is 'Papapa Rock.'"

✓ NOTES ABOUT ISLANDS IN THE PACIFIC.—A rock exists near Kaula (southwest of Niihau) which is not laid down on all charts, and of whose existence some are not aware. It lies in N. latitude  $21^{\circ} 27'$ , west long  $161^{\circ} 19'$ , about forty miles W. S. W. of Kaula Rock, fifty-five from Niihau, and 190 from Honolulu due west. It was ~~seen~~ by Capt. Stone of the brig *Kamehameha V*, and also by Capt. Rickman of the same vessel two years since. In shape it resembles a sugar-loaf, and is about two hundred feet high, a peak rising apparently out of deep water. Although marked doubtful on some recent charts, there is no doubt of its existence. Its name is "Papapa Rock."

In an 1870 Pacific Commercial Advertiser article, the writer states Moku Papapa's coordinates and that it's shaped like a sugarloaf.

[newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com)

Eventually, Moku Papapa fell off of maps. The latest mention I could find was "Rk," or rock, written on a 1925 Territory of Hawaii map near Kaula.

In 1864, Scottish plantation owner Elizabeth Sinclair purchased Niihau from Kamehameha V, closing off the island and its few hundred Native Hawaiian residents from anyone who didn't live there. The island is still owned today by Sinclair's descendants.

Terrill James Kane Alii Williams, a lineal descendant of people who lived on Niihau, told SFGATE that this may be why information about Moku Papapa stopped reaching a larger audience. Then, after the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and the banning of Hawaiian language in schools, it became more difficult for some stories to be passed down, as they were written in Hawaiian.

"If you can't speak the Hawaiian language or read it, there's no way of being able to read a Hawaiian language newspaper where the stories are right there and documented," he said.

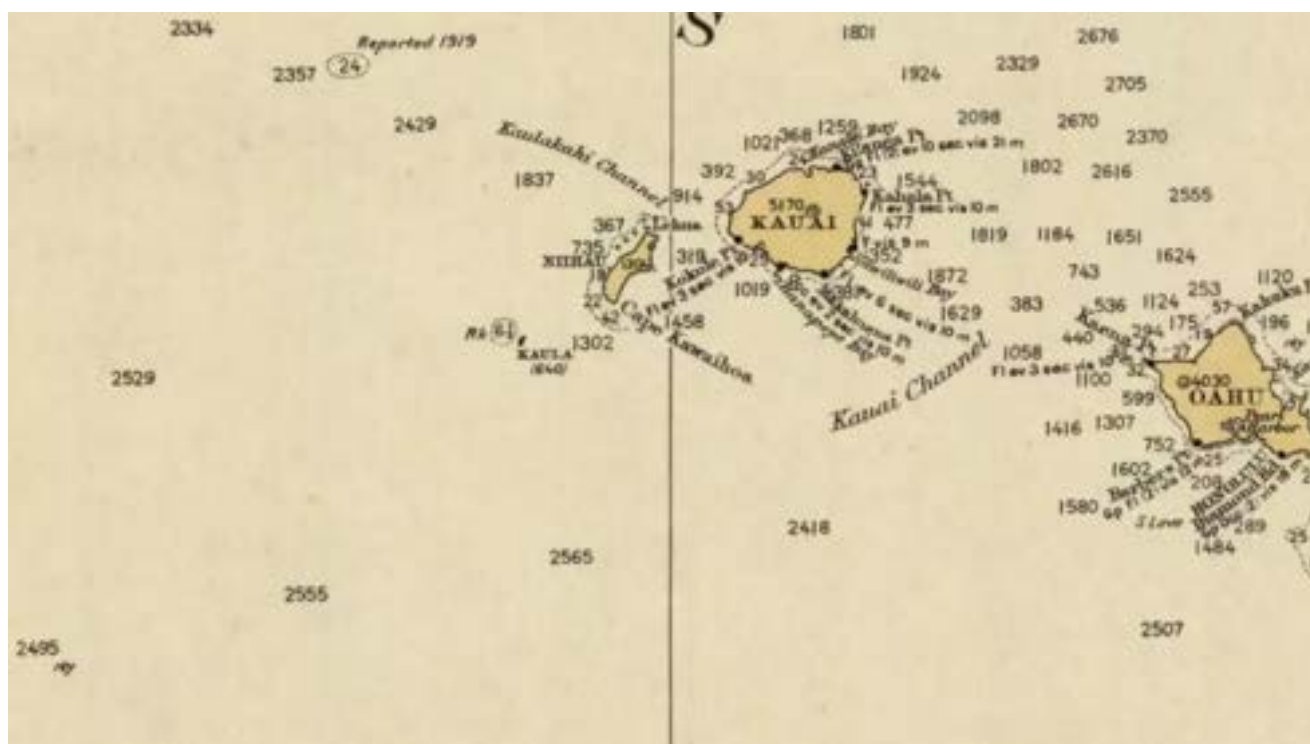


Kaula Island, May 8, 2008.  
Xpda via Wikicommons CC 3.0

Kane Alii's ancestors, who lived on the side of Niihau that faces the direction of Kaula and Moku Papapa, carry the name Papapa in their family. They moved to Kauai before Sinclair bought Niihau.

Niihau, Kaula and Moku Papapa are culturally tied together. Kane Alii said they are named side by side in birthing chants of the Islands and they are all part of the voyaging pathway from Niihau to Tahiti. "A lot of people don't know about Niihau and the genealogies, unless the families are directly tied to the island," he said.

Kane Alii doesn't think the island was necessarily lost — the stories about it are still out there, available in Hawaiian newspapers — but agrees there are variations written of Moku Papapa's location. He has never been there, but what he knows for certain is that it is southwest of Niihau.



The 1925 Territory of Hawaii map was published by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Moku Papapa was listed only as "Rk."

UH Library Map Collection



“Because we do have documentation that at least people from Kauai did travel to Kaula and then stopped there before going to Moku Papapa to hunt sea turtles, the presence of sea turtles will also help to identify location to where they were,” he said.

George Balazs, a Hawaii sea turtle scientist who worked for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for nearly 50 years, agrees. It’s what piqued his interest in Moku Papapa in the 1980s and led him on his own search for it. “The weaver for me, as with so many other things in my life since the late 60s, is the turtles,” Balazs told SFGATE.

“If there were turtles out there somewhere, even basking turtles, maybe they weren’t nesting turtles,” he added. “Where was this place that they were going to get them?”

## The expedition to Moku Papapa

Intrigued, Balazs and five others boarded a 32-foot fishing boat in 1983 and set out from Kauai to look for Moku Papapa.

Their research led them to an area that is a shallow 5 fathoms, or 30 feet, deep, and about 3 miles northwest of Kaula. “That’s why we were drawn to the spot we were, because of that 5-fathom depth popping up amid much greater depth, surrounded, which is why we thought it was a possible candidate,” Victor Lipman told SFGATE. He was the journalist on board the fishing boat, who wrote about the expedition for a [November 1983 article](#) in Honolulu magazine.

The team thought it was worth investigating, thinking it could possibly be shallower than the maps said, and that perhaps it was visible in Cook’s time.

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On the 1983 expedition, Don Moses and John Sinton (right) review nautical charts. The island of Kaula, Hawaii, is seen in the boat's window.

George Balazs

When they arrived, Lipman jumped in with a snorkel and mask and saw the bottom about 30 feet down. "It was a flat area," Lipman said. "I remember it sort of being, you know, whitish green ... kind of a white surface, and it dropped off fairly steeply." He described the pinnacle as pear-shaped, with a surface roughly 40 yards long by 30

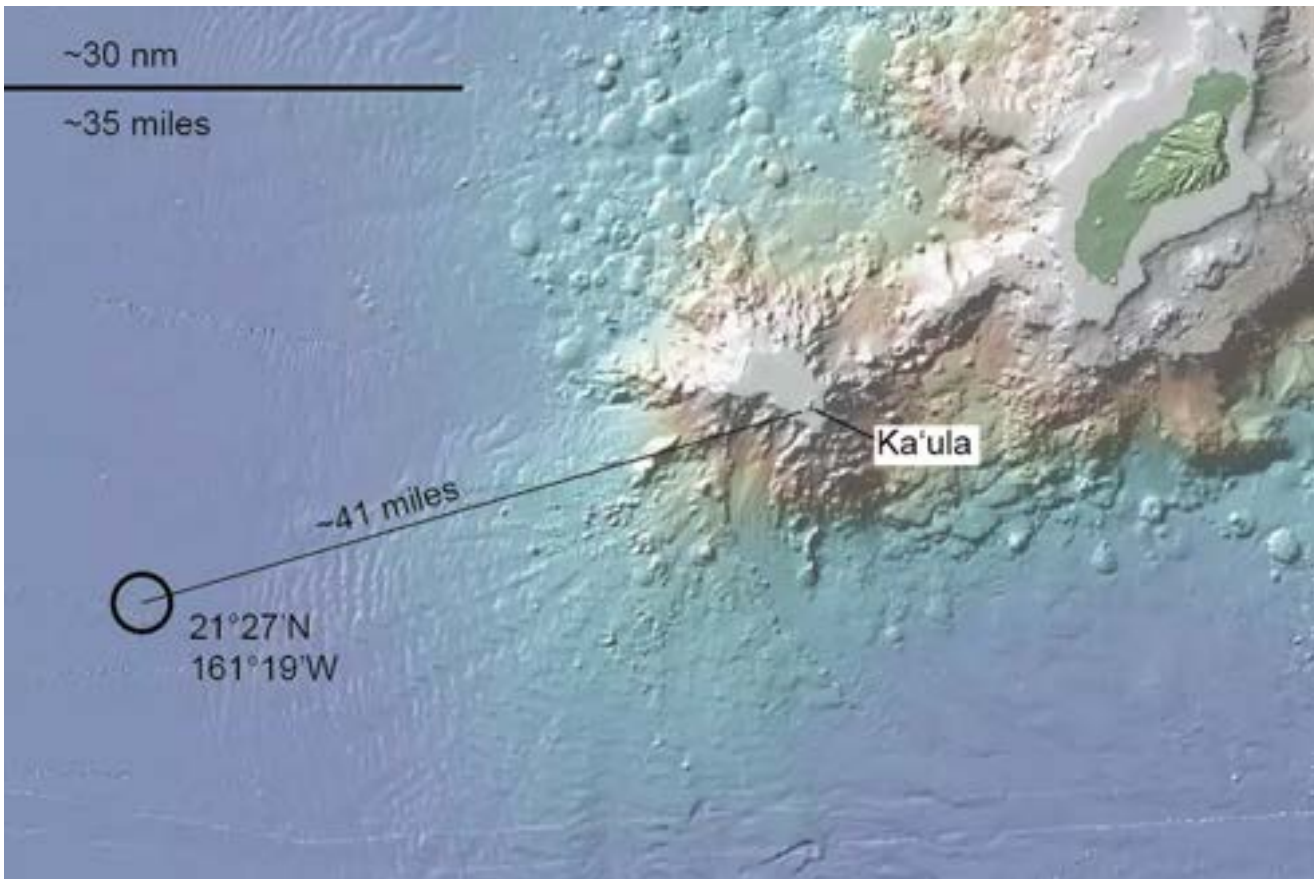
yards across and with edges that drop off like a cliff. They also saw 11 species of fish, as well as gray and white-tipped sharks, but no turtles.

Balazs concluded the pinnacle, commonly called the "Five Fathom Pinnacle," would not be a habitat for turtles. "It's too vulnerable. There's no underwater refuge," he said. "There was no limu, no seaweed, no nothing."

The team ended the mission unsure whether the place was Moku Papapa. "It was always a little bit inconclusive to me," said Lipman. It hinges on whether the island could have been visible in Captain Cook's time and be 30 feet underwater today. "Was there any way that area that we saw could have been submerged so dramatically in such a relatively short natural history period of time?" he asked.

Geophysicist John Sinton, an emeritus professor of Earth Sciences at the University of Hawaii, was also on the expedition in 1983 with Balazs and Lipman. He has no doubt that the pinnacle was above water at some point, but with a 30-foot depth, it wouldn't have been in the last 200 years. "It would be more, I would think thousands, possibly even hundreds of thousands of years," Sinton told SFGATE.

"I'm perplexed by this whole thing. There seems to be lots of reports of something out there and yet our modern maps don't show it," Sinton told SFGATE. He doesn't think that the Five Fathom Pinnacle, as an underwater seamount, fits the description written of Moku Papapa by early explorers. "But I don't have an alternative, [that] is part of the problem," he said.



John Sinton used the 1870 newspaper article's coordinates to create this map of where it said Moku Papapa's location was, out in deep open ocean.

GeoMapApp

"Based on our modern bathymetry, there's nothing out there that's shallow," Sinton said. Bathymetry is the study of underwater geology. "The maps that we have, they're not perfect. We don't have 100% coverage. ... But the combination of ship tracks and satellite data is pretty good. It's pretty hard to hide anything very big."

Regarding the pinnacle, he said he can't say whether something catastrophic happened in the pinnacle's past, though, he added, such an event would have generated tsunamis.

I asked if it could have been bombed, since Kaula, which has been bombed since 1952 by the U.S. military, is about 3 miles away. The U.S. Navy has used bombs, torpedoes and missiles in Kaula's past. In 1965, Navy pilots even mistook Niihau for Kaula, dropping eight 250-pound bombs on that island. Balazs also said he found evidence of bombing at Mokumanamana, another island northwest of Niihau.

SFGATE reached out to the U.S. Navy and the Kauai Pacific Missile Range Facility for this story but did not receive a response.

Sinton said he intentionally looked for signs of collapse when he was snorkeling around Five Fathom Pinnacle for a brief amount of time. "That was not apparent," he said.

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## Restoring cultural ties

Years after their expedition, the crew of the Hawaiian voyaging canoe Hokulea made a stop at Five Fathom Pinnacle in 2003, while returning from one of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Without a map or GPS, Native Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson, CEO of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, sailed the canoe there based on directions from Kauai fishermen.

"We actually found it," Thompson told SFGATE. "We just jumped in, and we expected not to see it. And God, I almost swallowed my snorkel. It was right there."



The double-hulled canoe Hokulea was built in the mid-1970s to replicate the traditional Hawaiian double-hulled voyaging canoe. Its crews have since sailed Hokulea over 140,000 miles across the Pacific using traditional Hawaiian navigation techniques.  
Polynesian Voyaging Society

He described the pinnacle similarly to how Lipman did. "The top was flat, but it did not have a lot of coral on it, you know, it was a flat top and the flat top was pretty small. I could see the whole circumference at 30 feet above," said Thompson.

He, however, believes that the Five Fathom Pinnacle is Moku Papapa.

"Essentially, it was subsidence, and then now, you know, marine sea level rising for a while, but at some point in time, it was above the water," he said, adding that he's not a geologist. "My guess is that if you're looking at 30 feet of subsidence ... that would be pre-Captain Cook."

Thompson described Kaula and the pinnacle as two peaks on one old island made from the same volcano. "At some point in time, it was above the water, but that would

be a pretty long time ago," he said.

I asked him about the coordinates from the 1870 article, and its report that Moku Papapa is 40 miles southwest of Kaula. Thompson, who's been ocean voyaging since 1980, told me without hesitation, "There's nothing out there."

This still leaves lingering questions about the 30-foot depth, its lack of turtles, or other sources claiming it is elsewhere, including halfway to Tahiti. But Kane Alii, who is his family's genealogist, said he agrees more with Thompson that Moku Papapa is the Five Fathom Pinnacle than other claims that it is northwest in the chain. The Hawaiian stories point southwest of Niihau, he said.

He hopes to one day visit the pinnacle and ultimately see the restoration of Kaula's and Moku Papapa's cultural ties with each other and to Niihau. "It's important for us as the families with these ties to maintain our cultural practices that our ancestors practiced," he said.

*Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform. SFGATE is spelling Moku Papapa as two words, per the direction of Kane Alii.*

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