

Ka'ula Island: The Seventh Child of Papa and Wākea

By Puanani Fernandez-Akamine - November 1, 2024



Ka'ula Island viewed from the north. Kahalauola, the sea cave said to be the home of the shark god Kūhaimoana, is visible on the right. - Photo: Xpda, Wikimedia Commons

“Hāiki Ka'ula i ka ho'okē a nā manu.

There isn't room enough on the island of Ka'ula, for the birds are crowding.”

About 23 miles west-southwest of Ni'ihau is the small, mostly forgotten island of Ka'ula.

There are no beaches on Ka'ula, just steep cliffs, making it a perfect location for seabirds. Some 18 species of endemic Hawaiian seabirds – about 100,000 of them – nest on Ka'ula and raise their young. Because of the sheer number and variety of seabirds who make their home on the island, Ka'ula is designated a seabird sanctuary by the Hawai'i State Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR).

Most people are unaware that Kaua'i County includes four islands: Kaua'i, Ni'ihau, Lehua and Ka'ula. Lehua is 284 acres and located less than a mile north of Ni'ihau. Ka'ula is 158 acres and the 10th largest of the major Hawaiian Islands.

He Wahi Kūpuna 'o Ka'ula



Regarding Ka'ula, tradition holds that the shark god Kūhaimoana makes his home there at Kahalauola, a large sea cave on the northwest side of the island.

Kūhaimoana is the largest and most celebrated of the shark gods. Second to him in size and power is Kamohoali'i, the older brother of Pele.

It was said that Kūhaimoana was so huge that the channels between the Hawaiian Islands were too small for him to comfortably navigate, and so he preferred to spend his time in the deep ocean off Ka'ula.

With sea cliffs soaring over 500 feet high, and no place to land canoes, there were no permanent human settlements on Ka'ula Island. However, it was a wahi kūpuna known to the people, especially fisherman. There are two stone structures near the island's summit, so it may have also been a place of worship.

In mo'olelo, Ka'ula was the seventh child of Papa and Wākea, the primordial ancestors of our people.

Modern History of Ka'ula

In 1909, via Executive Order 1019, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt set aside nearly all the small volcanic islands and coral atolls in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a wildlife sanctuary – what is now the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM). This action was taken to protect the millions of migratory seabirds that depended upon the islands for breeding from Japanese feather poachers that were slaughtering hundreds of thousands of birds in the area.

Excluded from the list of islands afforded sanctuary designation in 1909 were Ka'ula, which is about 150 miles from the southernmost end of PMNM, and Kuaihelani (Midway Atoll) which had been occupied by the Commercial Pacific Cable Company since 1903.

Arguably, both islands should have been included. Perhaps at the time it was deemed unnecessary, since the presence of the cable company at Kuaihelani already served as a deterrent to poachers as did Ka'ula's steep cliffs.

Today, Kuaihelani is included as part of Papahānaumokuākea, but Ka'ula is not.

In 1924, Hawai'i Territorial Gov. Wallace Rider Farrington signed Executive Order 173 setting aside Ka'ula for "public purpose" as a U.S. lighthouse site under the Department of Commerce. However, it was not until 1932 that an automated gas light was installed on the island.

An administrative decision made in Washington, D.C., in 1939 to move the Lighthouse Service of the Department of Commerce under the U.S. Coast Guard, ultimately imperiled Ka'ula as a sanctuary for native seabirds and paved the way for the U.S. military to use Ka'ula Island for target practice. The Coast Guard would retain jurisdiction over Ka'ula through 1965.

U.S. Military Activity at Ka'ula

Military use of Ka'ula began, unofficially, in 1952, when the Coast Guard allowed bombing and strafing of the island by Navy and Marine Corps aircraft. Strafing refers to repeated attacks (e.g., machine-gun fire) from low-flying aircraft.

There are no records indicating that the use of Ka'ula for military training was approved by the Territorial Government, the U.S. Congress or the U.S. President.

Concerned about the senseless killing of seabirds on Ka'ula, during the 1960s Kaua'i residents became increasingly vocal in their opposition of the military's use of the island. In 1961, the Kaua'i Board of Supervisors officially asked the Navy to stop the bombing, but that request was ignored – as were other subsequent requests.

In 1965, at the urging of her constituents, U.S. Rep. Patsy Mink inquired about the military's use of Ka'ula Island. In response, the Department of the Interior moved towards incorporating Ka'ula into the northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge – but backed off when the Navy responded that Ka'ula was "vital" to the ongoing war effort in Vietnam despite its concurrent use of Kaho'olawe Island for war training.

A few months later, jurisdiction of Ka'ula Island was transferred from the Coast Guard to the U.S. Navy. The Navy has continued to use Ka'ula for target practice through the ensuing decades, although a switch from live-fire to inert (non-explosive) ordnance was made sometime in the 1980s. However, similar to Kaho'olawe, unexploded live ordnance remains on the island.

A Proposal to Increase Military Activities on Ka'ula



In August 2024, the Navy released a draft environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate potential impacts of increasing its training activities in areas currently under the authority of the Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) based at Waiapua'a Bay (Barking Sands) on Kaua'i. This includes increasing the use of Ka'ula Island for target practice.

The uptick in U.S. military training in Hawai'i is likely a response to unrest in Asia, namely territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the deterioration of China-Taiwan relations.

The draft EA was met with staunch opposition from both Native Hawaiian and conservation groups.

"When the Navy released the EA proposing to increase the number of bombs dropped on Ka'ula many residents were shocked to learn they were still using the island as target practice," commented Ka Lāhui Hawai'i spokesperson Healani Sonoda-Pale.

In a statement issued by the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, spokesperson Dr. Davianna Pōmaika'i McGregor said that the draft EA "does not accurately or adequately assess the impacts that increased military exercises will have on Ka'ula Island, the local environment and marine resources surrounding the island" and that it was deficient in its Cultural Impact Assessment. She called for a full environmental impact study (EIS).

UH Mānoa professor and militarism expert Dr. Kyle Kajihiro agrees. "The Navy's draft environmental assessment is in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act. The sheer magnitude of the proposed increases in training activity should have triggered a full environmental impact statement."

"Kaho'olawe and Ka'ula share a similar plight," notes McGregor. "Both are sacred sites of irreplaceable cultural significance to the Native Hawaiian people that were wrongfully taken by the U.S. military for live-fire use. In fact, it is unclear how the U.S. military could move forward with its illegal use of Ka'ula until the all-important question of ownership of the island is resolved."

The question of who owns Ka'ula is important. When the island was set aside for a lighthouse in the 1920s, it was already viewed as a wildlife sanctuary. The Navy's eventual acquisition of Ka'ula in 1965 is questionable. "The EA does not provide documentation of the land title," Kajihiro notes. "This is a point of contention."

“If these are in fact state and not federal lands – as DLNR itself has asserted – then the state has constitutional and fiduciary obligations to protect Ka’ula,” said Sierra Club Hawai’i Director Wayne Tanaka.



Seeking public input on its draft EA, the Navy conducted a meeting on Sept. 17 in Līhu’e, but reportedly, fewer than 20 people attended. “The Navy’s public notification and participation process has been a failure,” observed Kajihiro. “This was evident in the dismal turnout at the public meeting.”

The Impact of Increased Military Activity on Ka’ula

In its draft EA, the Navy proposes to limit target practice on Ka’ula to 11 acres on the southern tip of the island and continue its use of inert ordnance.

The 208-page document concludes that increased military activity on Ka’ula and at PMRF “would not result in significant cumulative impacts” on air quality, climate change/greenhouse gases, noise, public health and safety, terrestrial biological resources (i.e., seabirds and other wildlife), or cultural resources.

But Kajihiro says that the Navy has not studied the existing baseline conditions of the natural and cultural resources on Ka’ula. “It has no idea how the environment may have been affected by decades of training so it cannot possibly evaluate the cumulative impacts of its proposed future activities.

“The Navy has not done complete archaeological and cultural resources studies of the island,” he added. “The draft EA ignores Ka’ula’s cultural importance to Kānaka ‘Ōiwi. The entire island must be evaluated as a significant cultural resource.”

McGregor notes that the Council for Environmental Quality’s regulations identify factors that must be considered when measuring the intensity of potential impacts and that “an in-depth assessment of the cumulative effects of 70 years of bombing and target practice” is needed.

“The profound disconnection of Native Hawaiians from lands and waters under U.S. military jurisdiction continues to have lasting negative and generational impacts on the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous people of Hawai’i Nei,” McGregor added.

Abuse of a Wildlife Sanctuary



Hundreds of thousands of native seabirds nest on Ka'ula annually. Although inert ordnance is used in current and proposed military training on the island, that does not mean there is no impact on the birds.

The use of inert ordnance simply means that the bombs and bullets being fired do not include explosives – however, inorganic materials are still being fired at the island at high speed.

Inert bullets are typically made of plastic or aluminum, while inert bombs may be made from concrete or iron. Bullets travel in excess of 1,000 mph and bombs fall at 200 mph. The resulting impact on the island – and its inhabitants – is anything but neutral.

Moreover, the noise produced by low-flying helicopters and machine guns is terror-producing for seabirds. Newborn chicks are too young to fly away and escape, while panicked adults can injure or abandon their babies and/or eggs.

“Native wildlife, including endangered seabirds that are known to nest in rubble-strewn areas like the target zone on Ka'ula, will almost certainly be killed or displaced,” said Tanaka.

The last ground-based survey of native wildlife on Ka'ula was in 1998. Since then, there have only been aerial (radar) surveys of the island. Jonee Kaina Peters, executive director of the Conservation Council of Hawai'i said that a full accounting of seabirds on the island is not possible without land surveys. “Some seabirds are underground burrow nesters. They can't be seen or counted using radar.”

She adds that other probable casualties of military training at Ka'ula are Hawaiian monk seals and turtles. “Ordnance that lands in the water has the potential to destroy coral and marine wildlife.”

As sea levels rise due to climate change, habitats like Ka'ula, with its towering sea cliffs, are increasingly important. Recent modeling scenarios indicate that anywhere from 5 to 69% of terrestrial habitats in Papahānaumokuākea could be lost by the year 2100. Preserving Ka'ula as a habitat for endangered seabirds that will likely be displaced over the next several decades will be critical to their survival.

“Ka’ula Island is a sacred child of Wākea and Papa, home to endangered species, a bird sanctuary and an important fishing ground,” said Sonoda-Pale.

“Environmentalists and Kānaka Maoli alike are opposed to the bombing of this island, let alone increasing the number of bombs being dropped.”

“By bombing Ka’ula and the surrounding waters, the Navy will be destroying native wildlife, their ecosystems, and disrespecting Native Hawaiian culture and values,” said Peters. “It is my hope, for future generations, that Ka’ula be returned to the State of Hawai’i and co-managed by Native Hawaiian and conservation entities.”

Over 3,000 comments opposing the Navy’s proposal to increase its use of Ka’ula Island for military training were submitted by the Sept. 30 deadline. A decision regarding whether an EIS is required should be made in early 2025.

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Puanani Fernandez-Akamine is the editor of *Ka Wai Ola* newspaper and a multiple award-winning journalist. Before joining OHA in 2019, she worked for Kamehameha Schools. She is passionate about helping our lāhui tell their stories in their own words to inform, uplift and inspire. She cares deeply about social justice, Indigenous sovereignty, aloha ‘āina and animal welfare. Puanani lives in the ‘āina momona of Kahalu’u, O’ahu, with her extended ‘ohana and lots of dogs. Aloha Ke Akua. Aloha kekahi i kekahi.