Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES

volume 14 number 2
April / May 2011

See Spot Surf

Man's best friend takes to the waves

Tropical City

Tokyo's soft spot for Island music

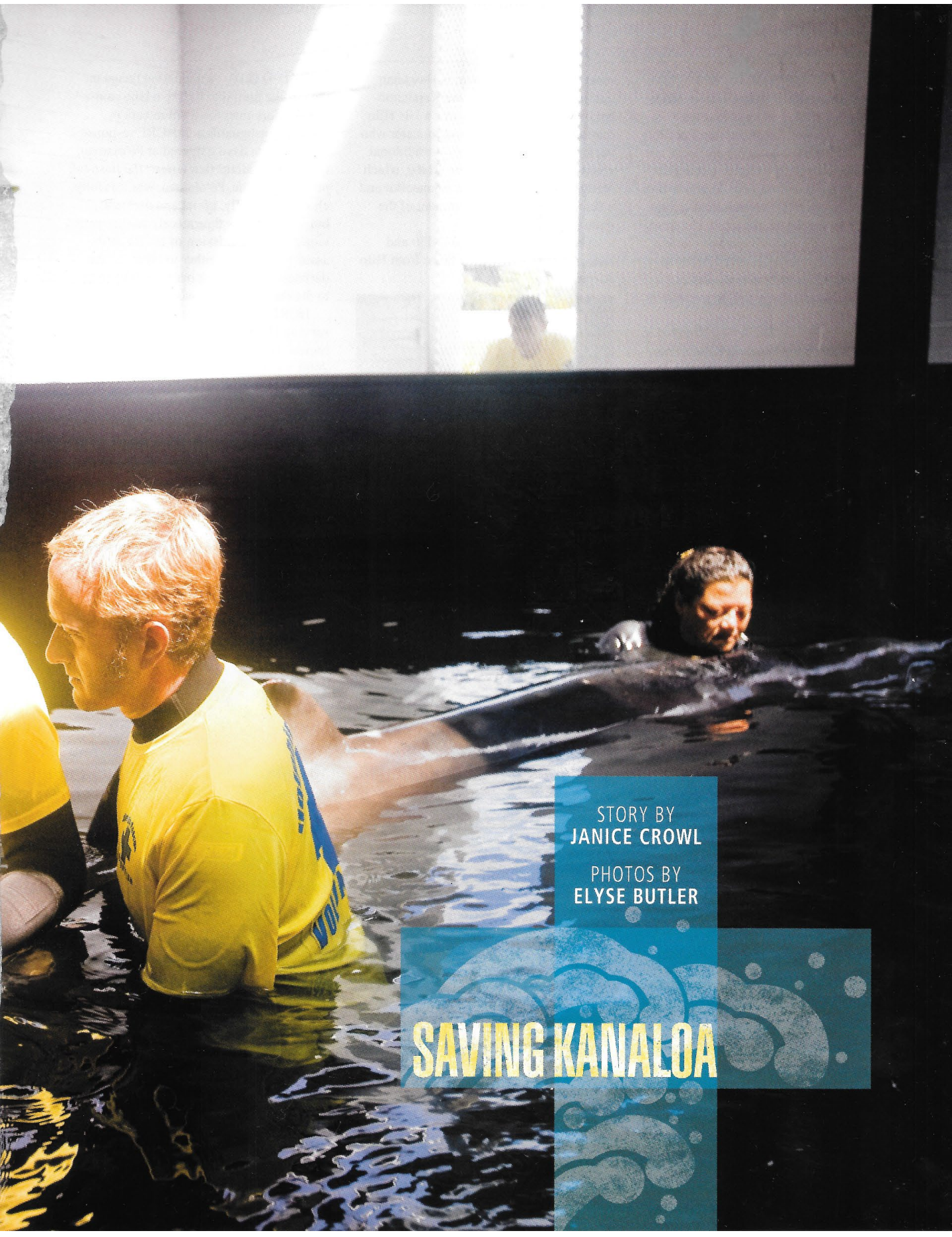
Root Master

Hawai'i's kalo kumu

Your Complimentary Copy

04
0 74470 66948 7
At the Newsstand: $3.99

INSIDE THE HAWAI'I CETACEAN REHABILITATION FACILITY



STORY BY
JANICE CROWL

PHOTOS BY
ELYSE BUTLER

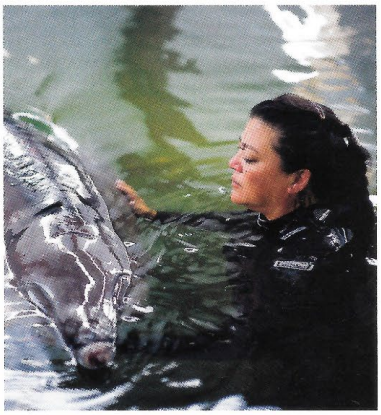
SAVING KANALOA

Day 1: August 16, 4:57 p.m. The whale is flying in from Maui. I'm driving to meet it at the Hawai'i Cetacean Rehabilitation Facility near Hilo, where volunteers and staff are gathering. I mentally practice getting the eleven-and-a-half-foot beaked whale into the facility's twenty-five-thousand-gallon hospital pool. Like most people, I've never even seen a Blainville's beaked whale; the species is rarely observed because it inhabits the deep ocean around the Hawaiian Islands. Now I'm on my way to try and save one.

Hours earlier the whale had stranded in shallow water off a beach in Kīhei. The Maui network reported it, and David Schofield, marine mammal response coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, headed out to assess its condition—stable enough, he deemed, to attempt the journey. The whale was loaded onto a Coast Guard flatbed, trucked to a C-130 waiting in Kahului and flown to Hilo.

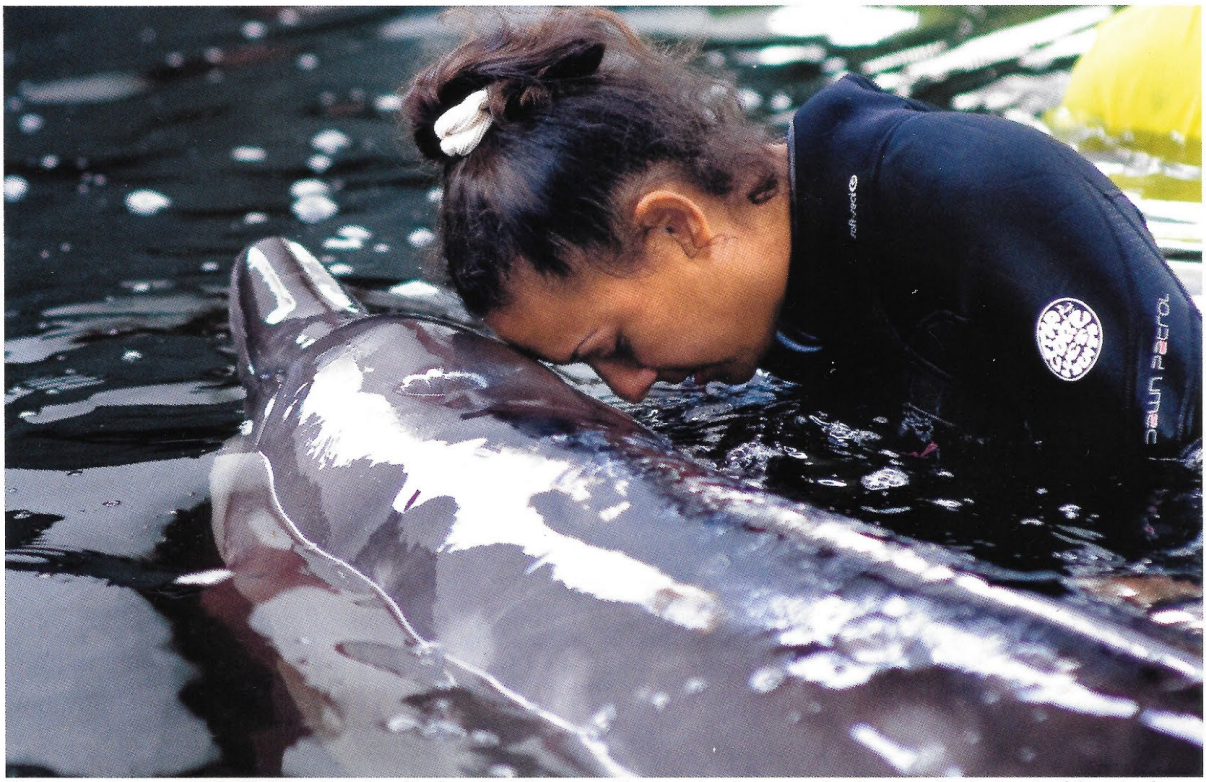
Jason and Jennifer Turner, husband-and-wife marine science professors at UH Hilo and HCRF co-directors, are there to meet the plane. With them is Hawaiian cultural practitioner Roxane Kapuaimohalaikalani Stewart. Stewart's a UH Hilo marine science graduate and educator who performs cultural protocols—traditional chants and offerings for the whale, which Native Hawaiians consider an ancestor and a Kanaloa, a sacred embodiment of the natural world.

The flatbed rolls off the C-130 and makes the tense half-mile drive from Hilo Airport to the facility.

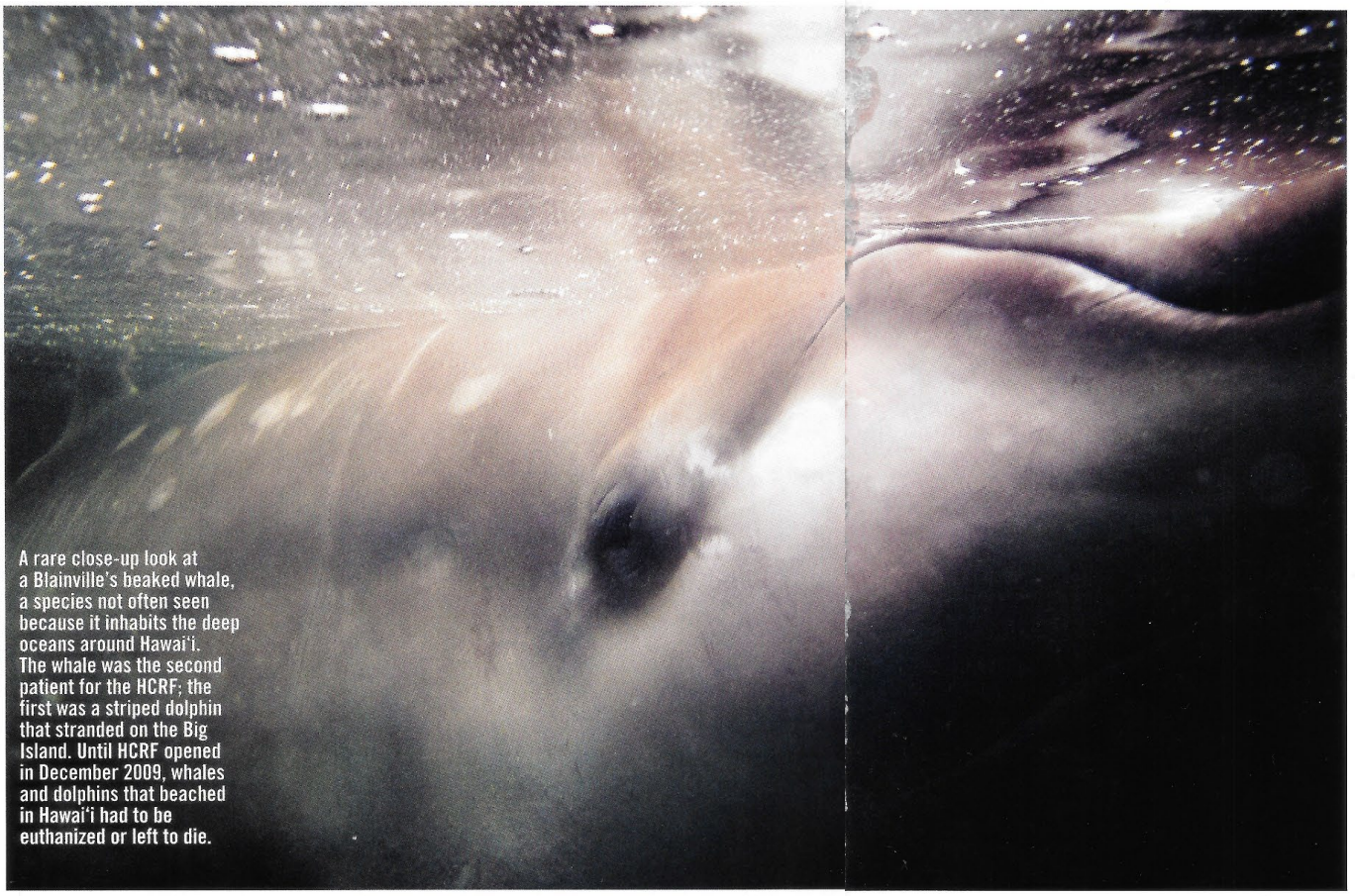


Day 1: 6 p.m. Anticipation hangs in the air like humidity before a Hilo rainstorm. More than forty volunteers in wetsuits, rashguards and HCRF response team T-shirts have gathered at Pō'olamau, the hale (building) that houses the hospital pool. That name, Pō'olamau, was carefully chosen: Literally, pō means darkness, but it also refers figuratively to the spirit world, and the mission of HCRF is to assist the Kanaloa either to return to the darkness of the living ocean or transition to the darkness of the world beyond.

HCRF is the only facility of its kind serving Hawai'i and the Pacific Islands region. Before it opened in December 2009, whales and dolphins that stranded on Hawai'i's beaches had no help; in most cases they had to be euthanized or left to die. The Marine Mammal Protection Act mandates cetacean rehabilitation facilities in six US regions. For the past five years, Hawai'i was the only region without one. HCRF got its start in early 2007 when Schofield approached the Turners, who teach at UH Hilo and had long experience in cetacean rehab, to gauge their interest in opening a facility.



Whale rescue is approached a bit differently in Hawai'i, where the indigenous culture regards cetaceans as Kanaloa, sacred embodiments of the natural world. Cultural practitioner Roxane Kapuaimohalaikalani Stewart mediates between the spirit and human worlds through chant and protocol. "From the Hawaiian perspective [whales] are thought of as somewhere between kūpuna (elders) and gods," says Jason Turner, co-director of the Hawai'i Cetacean Rehabilitation Facility (opening spread, left). "You owe them a much greater level of respect. ... It's that respect we have for the animal that's different."



A rare close-up look at a Blainville's beaked whale, a species not often seen because it inhabits the deep oceans around Hawai'i. The whale was the second patient for the HCRF; the first was a striped dolphin that stranded on the Big Island. Until HCRF opened in December 2009, whales and dolphins that beached in Hawai'i had to be euthanized or left to die.

The community was more than enthusiastic. In its first six months, HCRF recruited more than 220 volunteers: UH Hilo students wanting hands-on experience with whales and dolphins and community members like me. To become certified responders, volunteers must complete a NOAA-approved training program that comprises beach response, animal transport and care, daily operations and—what distinguishes HCRF from all other rehab facilities—Hawaiian cultural practices.

As the sun drops behind Mauna Kea, the crowd at the pool grows. Officials from UH Hilo, the Coast Guard, veterinary specialists and marine biologists watch as a team of thirty volunteers lifts the eighteen-hundred-pound whale on a stretcher. Angling it down from the flatbed, they pass it to other volunteers at ground level. It takes only a few seconds, but a few seconds is a long time when you're carrying a whale. We silently worry that it won't make it to the pool; after so much stress, it could die at any moment.

But it doesn't; it slides slowly headfirst into the water, its ocean now a six-foot-deep pool, its sky the roof of a concrete building. Stewart chants softly as volunteers in the pool cradle the whale until it swims and breathes on its own. They walk it in a circle, touching it only when it nears the sides of the pool. After a few minutes it circles alone, our second victory of the day. But this is only the beginning: The next twenty-four hours will be dedicated to stabilizing the whale; the staff, running on adrenaline, coffee, pizza and very little sleep, will probably be a lot less stable but determined to stay alert.

HCRF's commitment to humane care includes the caveat to "keep 'em wild," so no one talks to or touches the whale unless it's necessary. So much is alien to a whale's experience that volunteers shouldn't compound its stress by treating it like a pet (or a human). With the exception of the cultural practitioners, no one may talk to the animal. It will be named only after it's released. Or after it dies.

This is HCRF's second patient. On June 14 the residents of Miloli'i, a Kona fishing village, found the first patient, a male striped dolphin, attempting to beach itself. That dolphin initiated the facility in the exhausting work of cetacean rehabilitation—and the reality of its low success rate. Only 1 to 2 percent of rescues are released, because by the time a cetacean strands, it's "at death's door," says Jason Turner. Still, he's convinced that if even a single animal can be saved, it'll be worth the effort. For him rehab is a way to address the damage humans have done to the oceans, damage that leads to strandings. "Animals strand with ingested plastics, caught in fishing nets, with injuries from boat strikes. Or they have water- or airborne diseases passed through domestic animals. These are things we've had a hand in, and we're trying to correct them. If we can release one animal with ingested plastic, the whole thing's a success."

But the dolphin was not to be that success. It couldn't swim on its own, and when it came in it had to be held at the surface to breathe. It died after eighteen hours; its immune system was impaired and it was simply too ill. I was on the team keeping the dolphin afloat; coincidentally, the day it died was my birthday. It was hard to accept the loss, but I have realized its death was a gift: a reminder of how

Science and spirit: While Stewart communicates with the patient, Turner and HCRF volunteers use ultrasound to diagnose the whale's condition. Tests revealed that it suffered from severe gastrointestinal distress, kidney disease and pneumonia.

much more we need to learn if we really want to make a difference.

The people of Miloli'i named the dolphin Waikini, after the waters where it was found.

Day 3: August 18, 12:15 p.m.

The primary care team has had only catnaps over the past thirty-six hours. The day is busy with blood work, ultrasound, hearing tests. Before each procedure, Stewart chants and tells the Kanaloa what will be done.

Everyone speaks quietly as they record respiration, behavioral and physical observations. David Schofield, state veterinarian Gregg Levine, UH Hilo students and others help the ultrasound specialist capture images of the vital organs. Levine draws blood from the fluke. The hearing test, the first ever performed on a beaked whale, shows no problems. The blood work reveals a possible kidney disorder, and the presence of a Y-chromosome identifies it as a subadult male.

He's strong enough to swim. He can bite, and with one flip of his fluke, he could bloody a nose, break a ribcage, even kill someone. But he doesn't. He's calm and compliant, like a one-ton Labrador at the vet's.

Day 4: August 20, 2:25 p.m.

The whale has survived for four days, and we're feeling optimistic. But there's still a long road ahead.

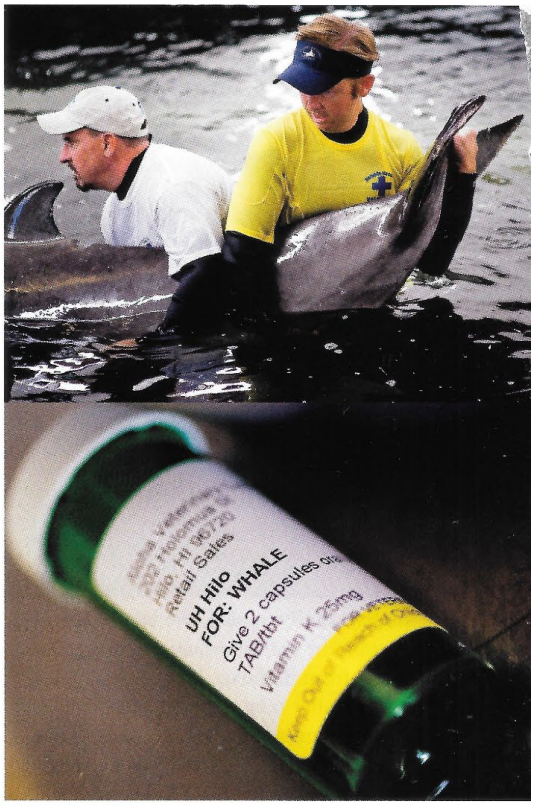
Despite the wetsuit, I'm freezing. I feel the chill of the water pumped in from offshore as I assist Jason Turner along with Stewart and UH Hilo marine science student Emily Sepeta. We barely need to restrain the listless whale as Turner draws blood from its fluke. Its skin feels like a rubber inner tube stretched taut over powerful muscle. Some cetaceans, like this one, refuse food when first brought into captivity and must be tube-fed. Turner gives the whale a "milkshake" of puréed squid and administers medicine. He also develops a method to hand-feed whole squid, an important step toward recovery.

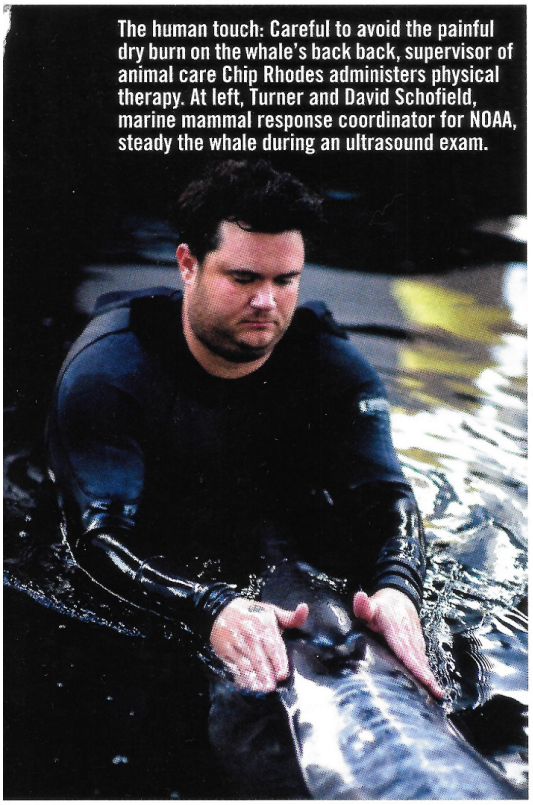
The whale is being treated for pneumonia, kidney and gastrointestinal problems. Turner decides that from now on feedings will be done with only one person in the pool to minimize stress.

Day 11: August 26, 2:45 p.m.

Rescuing a whale is exciting in the abstract, but the minutiae are mostly boring. I'm doing data collection on my four-hour shift. The drone of the water filter and pump lulls me into a stupor. I record the number of respirations the whale makes and take notes on its behavior. There isn't much to say: This is a sick whale. It swims slowly in circles. It doesn't play, doesn't vocalize. Sometimes it lingers at the edge of the pool. The rhythm of its breathing is etched into my brain: exhale, inhale, hold. Minutes pass before it inhales again.

But the long stretches of not much happening give me a chance to reflect on what Stewart says about the spiritual side of this work. Predictably, maybe inevitably, Native Hawaiian thinking is frequently at odds with science—the idea that a whale could be a spiritual ancestor is an anathema to Western rationalism. "These Kanaloa were messengers between different islands,





The human touch: Careful to avoid the painful dry burn on the whale's back back, supervisor of animal care Chip Rhodes administers physical therapy. At left, Turner and David Schofield, marine mammal response coordinator for NOAA, steady the whale during an ultrasound exam.

chiefs and even different groups of Polynesians," she explains. "We have stories of whales taking our ali'i [royalty] to different areas to be taught things that can't be learned here, then brought back so that knowledge could be utilized."

That what science would dismiss as myth should be valued in a rehab setting is a source of friction between Native Hawaiians and federal agencies. But from a Hawaiian point of view, it's important to have a cultural practitioner on hand who sees the whales as not only animals, but as messengers still—and who views these strandings as part of the message. It's the practioner's job, she explains, to try and interpret it.

"Why are these Kanaloa selecting this time to surface?" she asks. "Why so many in such a short time? What is it that they're telling us? Practitioners need to be involved in every stranding on every island because we never know what particular information that Kanaloa was sent to give us. We don't know exactly what they're saying, but it's something huge. Things need to change."

Day 14: August 29, 6 p.m. I check my voicemail. It's Jennifer Turner.

"You were here a lot, and I just wanted to let you know: The whale passed. Thanks for all your help. There will be cultural death rites ceremonies. Another agency will be doing a necropsy," she sighs. "It's going to be a long night."

Necropsy results confirm the whale had moderate pneumonia, severe gastrointestinal disease and kidney disease. Under HCRF's care it survived for fourteen days, one of the longest durations in captivity in history for a beaked whale. Although the whale couldn't be saved, the data collected brings us closer to understanding this species and the health of the oceans in general. And it better prepares HCRF for the next patient—the one that could be its first release.

My experience with Waikini had prepared me for the disappointment of cetacean rehab; it's a quixotic business of the heart. As an on-call volunteer I'm saddened, but I'm spared the emotional rip currents that pull at the round-the-clock caregivers. One volunteer, Bob Green, a registered nurse, says it best: "No matter how long you've been doing this kind of work, when you deal with a patient intimately and compassionately, it hurts to see them go."

The cultural practitioners of Maui honor their ancestor by naming the whale Kāmaui, "the one belonging to Maui." **HH**

Visit www.dolphinrehab.org for more information.