



Sacred Or Sacrificed? Kauai's Secret Island Sparks New Battle

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Very few visitors have heard of Kaula, and even fewer have had the opportunity to see it. The tiny 158-acre island, now eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), sits about 55 miles southwest of Kauai. Declared sacred in 2025, it is also a U.S. Navy bombing range, raising questions that have no easy answers. While it is sometimes confused with nearby Niihau, Kaula is smaller, uninhabited, and federally controlled.



expansion of its Hawaii strategy as a dominant

In September 2025, the U.S. Navy determined that Kaula Island is eligible as a traditional cultural place under federal historic preservation law, after consultations with Native Hawaiian organizations and the Hawai'i State Historic Preservation Officer

"In accordance with the NHPA, the Navy is consulting with Native Hawaiian Organizations and the Hawaii State Historic Preservation Officer to develop a memorandum of agreement that will minimize or mitigate adverse effects on Kaula Island, a recently identified traditional cultural place. While this consultation is pending, no training will occur on the island unless the Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet authorizes it for national defense or national security purposes." (PMRF Public Affairs)

For more than 70 years, Kaula has been used for gunnery and inert bombing practice during training missions. Today, the Navy states that it is taking steps to protect both Kaula's cultural significance and its fragile seabird habitats, geology, and surrounding marine ecosystem.

Still, the contradiction is hard to ignore: how can a place be sacred and militarized at the same time?

Kaula has been part of Hawaii's larger military presence in the Pacific and one of several remote sites that were used for ongoing defense training. It's also a place with deep cultural ties, though few outside the islands know anything about it.

A place you can't visit but that still matters.

Kaula is uninhabited. It has no beaches, no trails, no welcome signs. It rises steeply out of the Pacific in a dramatic arc of lava and seabird nests. Officially, it is a State Seabird Sanctuary. Unofficially, it has long been a place of quiet tension between cultural preservation and military control.

And while it is closed to the public due to safety concerns, including unexploded ordnance, it remains part of the broader story of Hawaii's complex relationship with the U.S. military.

Just like Kahoolawe, another island once shelled into a near-lunar landscape and later returned to Native Hawaiian oversight, Kaula is now becoming a flashpoint for conversations about land use, identity, and responsibility.

Navy training continues despite sacred status.

The military says it will implement additional safeguards for the use of the island for training, which in recent years has been limited to inert (non-explosive) ordnance.

For decades, Kaula was designated on Navy maps as an impact zone, marked by a yellow arc off the island's southern coast. While it was long used for gunnery and inert bombing practice, that activity is now on hold during consultations. Yet the designation remains, leaving open the possibility of future training flights if national defense requires it.

Traditional, sacred, off-limits.

There is an undeniable contradiction at play here. The same site, now recognized as culturally sacred, remains inaccessible to both Native Hawaiians and the general public.

Oral histories and chants tie Kaula to ancient voyaging routes and spiritual traditions. However, access to the island is currently prohibited. No cultural visitation. No stewardship. No healing.

The irony of protecting a place by forbidding anyone from reaching it is not lost on many in the community.

Echoes of Kahoolawe.

This is not the first time Hawaii has faced this dilemma. Kahoolawe, the smallest of the eight main Hawaiian islands, was used for decades as a bombing range before being returned to the state in 1980. Cleanup efforts have been slow and incomplete, and access remains limited to cultural and educational purposes.

Kaula may be headed down a similar path. But without the same momentum behind it.

There is no active protest movement surrounding Kaula. No occupation. No public-facing campaign. Instead, its new designation is quietly administrative. Its past is hidden from sight. And its future is still largely controlled by federal authority.

Hawaii's military footprint is bigger than visitors realize.

Travelers to Kauai might drive past the Pacific Missile Range Facility near Kekaha without a second glance. But PMRF is the largest instrumented missile testing range in the world. And it is just one part of a sprawling network of military sites across the islands, some visible and others hidden behind fencing or offshore.

The average visitor is often unaware that Hawaii features extensive training grounds and restricted zones. Even fewer know that a remote islet southwest of Kauai was used for practice runs.

Kaula may be out of sight, but its story is very much part of the modern Hawaii landscape.

Why this matters for visitors.

You cannot visit Kaula. You cannot snorkel near it or take photographs of it on a hike. But what happens to places like Kaula still shapes how residents and visitors experience Hawaii.

When lands with sacred value are militarized, it deepens the tension between preservation and power. It also raises questions about what kind of Hawaii is being protected, and for whom.

We have seen how these stories resonate before. Mauna Kea. Kahoolawe. Even the shoreline closures and community protests on Kauai's north shore. They reflect a deeper current running beneath Hawaii's postcard image.

What comes next.

The historic eligibility finding could mean new federal protections or, at the very least, more scrutiny around Kaula's future use. But so far, there is no plan to open the island to visitation or hand over any stewardship to Native Hawaiian organizations.

Legal ownership remains murky. The State of Hawaii claims Ka'ula as part of Kauai County. The federal government continues to operate it under a 1959 presidential order.

For now, one of Hawaii's most off-limits islands has become something else: a symbol of the gap between intention and reality. Between honoring a place and letting it heal.

Lead [photo credit](#).

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5 thoughts on “Sacred Or Sacrificed? Kauai’s Secret Island Sparks New Battle”

Da M

September 25, 2025 at 8:07 am

I’m sure that just like with the tourists, if a plane flew over and bombed with ca\$h it wouldn’t be as sacred as it has recently become.

 3

[REPLY](#)

Don

September 25, 2025 at 7:58 am

Who is this rock sacred to? The birds. Is it no photos taken because it was used for military bombing exercises or because someone declared it sacred? If it resides in waters 55 miles off of Kauai and are assuming the closest landmark I thought Hawaii could only claim territory and waters of a 30 mile radius of any island. Wouldn’t that make this in international waters.

 2

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Jett S.

September 25, 2025 at 3:18 am

Okay, I'm missing something – how is this featureless arc of uninhabitable basalt a long ways away from anywhere by canoe a “sacred place?”

And who has the authority to make such a declaration?

This has the scent of “hey the military wants to use this – quick, call it sacred so we can screw with them.”

 13

REPLY

Drew808

September 25, 2025 at 9:25 am

If you understood even the most basic relationship between kānaka maoli and the ‘āina, you would not ask these questions.

 1

REPLY

Tom&Beth

September 25, 2025 at 3:08 pm

Thank you Drew for making sense.

Aloha



REPLY



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