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Hawai‘i and Tourism Reimagined

John De Fries

At a gala banquet in 2018 at the Hyatt Regency Waikiki, Nainoa Thompson was being honored by the Aloha Chapter of the prestigious tourism organization, Meeting Professionals International (MPI), for his contributions and achievements in the category of Hawaiian Culture. Nainoa was humbled as an honoree, yet perplexed about why an ocean voyaging navigator was receiving a tourism award.

Being with Nainoa caused me to recall that in just over three years at sea, the crew of Hōkūle‘a had visited 150 ports, engaged more than 100,000 people in eighteen nations, voyaged through eight Marine World Heritage Sites, and was received at the United Nations on World Oceans Day 2016 by Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon—a protocol usually reserved for heads of state and leaders of global stature.

Known as Mālama Honua, this worldwide voyage was an epic achievement for all of Hawai‘i, sharing our message of caring for our planet in all that we do. That evening in Waikiki, Hawai‘i’s visitor industry was honoring Nainoa as president of the Polynesian Voyaging Society and as a global ambassador from Hawai‘i.

Prior to the presentation, Nainoa shared a thought with me. What if we thought of tourists as students and Hawai‘i as a school? What if we taught them how we mālama Hawai‘i, so when they go home, they can mālama their own families and places?

This thought was profound and prescient, as less than two years later a global pandemic would bring the visitor industry as we knew it to a grinding halt.

Waikiki as Home and a Place of Learning

Nainoa’s message affected me viscerally, because we were in the heart of Waikiki—just four blocks from where I was born and raised. Millions of people from around the world come to know Waikiki as the mecca of Hawai‘i’s visitor industry, I came to know Waikiki as the piko of my family life.

Nainoa’s concept of Hawai‘i as a school took me back to those childhood memories. The highlight of weekends was going fishing with my Uncle John, whose ‘ohana lived next door. Our fishing grounds at Waikiki Beach were five to eight feet deep, starting at the “Deep Holes” seawall promenade (in alignment with Kapahulu Avenue) and extending west to the Halekūlani Hotel. It was during those

times—the early 1960s—as a ten-year-old with Uncle John that I learned three essential qualities about Waikīkī Beach. It was a source of food, a source of medicine, and a place of recreation for our families—in that order.

Although he didn't talk about it much, I knew that Uncle John was bothered that the oceanfront row of hotels was being built too close to the shoreline. Besides the aesthetic impact of high-rises on the Waikīkī shore, my uncle knew about the ocean's tidal patterns and the contraflow of subsurface waters from the hillsides of Mānoa, Makiki, and Pālolo.

In my late teens, Uncle John and my father's sister, Aunty Emma, told me about my great-grandfather's concerns about shoreline hotel construction and fluctuations in the subsurface water table. He predicted that “one day, Waikīkī will choke on its own sewage.”

Fast forward to March 24, 2006, when 48 million gallons of raw sewage was dumped into the Ala Wai Canal due to a ruptured line. A government official issued the following statement: “Pumping sewage into the Ala Wai Canal prevented the waste from backing up into homes, hotels, and businesses located in Waikīkī and nearby areas.” Upon reading this, my thoughts immediately drifted back to my great-grandfather's prophetic words.

He Lani Ko Luna, He Honua Ko Lalo—Connections Between Heaven and Earth

My paternal great-grandfather had a deep understanding of water and its flows in the ocean and beneath the land. My maternal grandmother was in tune with the celestial knowledge of our ancestors, those who looked to the heavens to understand natural patterns and human behaviors. My first few years of life, when she raised me, and the summers I later spent with her in Hōlualoa, Kona, on Hawai'i Island, shaped my lifelong fascination with the heavens.

In October of 2017, observatories on Haleakalā and Maunakea detected the first known interstellar asteroid passing through our solar system. It was given the Hawaiian name 'Oumuamua by the distinguished Hawaiian language expert Dr. Larry Kimura, an associate professor of Hawaiian Language and Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo.

His translation of the name is the “advanced scout-messenger from the distant past,” from that place our ancestors referred to as Pō. This name led me to ask: “What message is 'Oumuamua bringing to us?”

About six months later, on May 3, 2018, the volcanic eruptions of lower Puna on the east side of Hawai'i Island began and continued in unprecedented fashion for five months, with lava fountains of up to 300 feet.

This awesome display and the magnitude of these eruptions caused me to ponder even more deeply the possible connections between this volcanic activity and the discovery of 'Oumuamua.

Talking with friends and colleagues during the summer of 2018, I began to describe this new sensation I was feeling—that we in Hawai'i were experiencing the beginning of a transformation that our ancestors referred to as *huliau*—the turning point in a time of change.

My feeling was reaffirmed in July 2019, when Maunakea Access Road was blocked by the *kia'i*, a well-organized coalition of Native Hawaiians and *kama'āina* joining those who had dedicated decades to protecting Maunakea. The blockade and the *pu'uhonua* that grew around it were unified in opposing the building of the Thirty Meter Telescope. After three months of this standoff, in an op-ed for the local media, I said in part:

The law and order upon which our civil society is reliant has been supplanted, for now, by a socio-cultural phenomenon and vision of Hawai'i's future—a future where we as Native Hawaiians assert the inherent right to self-determination. This political force is resounding on Maunakea and throughout the State, thus producing the current quandary that must be resolved for the well-being of Native Hawaiians and for Hawai'i as a whole.

From Huliau to Hulihia—A World Turned Upside Down for the Better

As many tensions in Hawai'i were coming to a head, the COVID-19 pandemic wrapped around the world. With leisure travel essentially shut down globally due to public health restrictions and concerns for personal well-being, Hawai'i's visitor-reliant economy came to a standstill.

“Professor Pandemic” has walked into the global classroom with a life-threatening reminder that for too long, humans have encroached into the natural habitats of wildlife, increasing the number of animal diseases transmitted to humans. During the course of study for this pandemic, the worldwide lesson plan and the local homework assignment is to restore a better balance in how we live in relation to all life forms and living systems.

For me, the lessons of my grandparents and family, of growing up in Waikīkī, of 'Oumuamua, the Puna eruption, the movement to protect Maunakea, and now this pandemic crystallize into a collective mandate for all of us to *mālama*, to care for and nurture, all life.

Perhaps 'Oumuamua is delivering this message celestially. Perhaps *mālama* was the lesson learned by those who cared for neighbors throughout the Puna eruption. *Mālama* is certainly the refrain sung by the fearless *kia'i* on Maunakea. It is also the wisdom Nainoa and the crew shared on their worldwide voyage. And *mālama* must be the guiding principle as we reimagine Hawai'i not as a destination for passive recreation, but for active and serious contemplation of how interconnected we are with the heavens, oceans, land, and to one another.

As protective restrictions in Hawai'i and around the world are lifted, tourism's recovery will be slow and long, causing financial pain and suffering for thousands of Hawai'i families. But we must not squander this opportunity by reopening too hastily, before we have carefully considered our future, and reimagined Hawai'i's tourism-based economy.

Adopted policies such as the Aloha+ Challenge and the Hawai'i Tourism Authority's new strategic plan give me hope, and efforts such as the 'Āina Aloha Economic Futures initiative give our community the opportunity to shape that future.

This global condition of huluhia calls on us to emerge with new ways to innovate, survive, and thrive. Our children and generations to come are counting on it. Mālama pono.

Work Cited

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John De Fries was raised in Waikiki at the advent of tourism's ascent to the center of Hawai'i's economy. He has worked as a tour director, resort and real estate developer, director of economic development for the County of Hawai'i, and executive director of the Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association. He currently serves as President and Principal Advisor of Native Sun Business Group, and on the boards of Kualoa Ranch, Bishop Museum, the Keāhole Center for Sustainability, and the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability at Arizona State University. He and his wife and business partner, Ginny, reside in Kona.