

Wai‘ale‘ale

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Growing up on Kaua‘i, I was taught that Mount Wai‘ale‘ale was the wettest spot on earth, and we keiki memorized this as part of what made our home unique and special. Within the past decade, Wai‘ale‘ale has been surpassed by places like Pu‘ukukui on Maui. This is one small example of how what we know and rely upon about the places we call home is changing with the weather. People on Kaua‘i know firsthand the impacts of climate change, affecting traditional practices such as salt-making in Hanapēpē, and making hurricane threats more frequent. From April 14–15, 2018, an extreme rainfall event scoured the entire island, particularly catastrophic along the northeast shore, in the moku of Halele‘a, where I grew up. One local rain gauge logged 49.6 inches of rainfall in 24 hours, a national record.

This piece shares my own experiences of those days and the months that followed, along with lessons gleaned from over seventy interviews with Kaua‘i ‘ohana, first responders, community organizers, government officials, and leaders who lived through the rising waters and responded to their aftermath. Recommendations for adapting to what interviewees called the “new normal” are interspersed with stanzas of a poem presented at the 2018 Kaua‘i Community College commencement ceremony, a month after the April floods.

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1. Wai‘ale‘ale (billowing or rippling waters)

At one AM on April 15, 2018,
my husband and I are awakened from sleep
by rain so hard I feel our roof will cave in.
It has been raining all day,
on and off, for a month here in Halele‘a.
But this rain is different. This rain thunders.

Minutes later my husband’s fire department radio
starts to crackle with 911 calls from Hanalei.
“A woman caller with three children says
the water is two feet from their door
and rising quickly. What should she do?”

One of the firemen radios in that they can't reach her house by truck
 due to water ten feet deep on the highway. They launch a jet ski,
 which sucks debris into its engine and stalls.
 Ten people need to be evacuated from the emergency shelter
 at the local elementary school.
 It is flooding too.
 We are up and texting friends in low lying areas to see if they are alright.
 Texts bleep back. "We are fine. We are on the second story
 and the water is a foot from the door. Thanks for checking on us."
 Our cell service goes dead.

Lesson #1 - Mahalo: Be thankful every day and remember what matters.
 Life, loved ones, living here, together.

Lesson #2 - 'Ike 'Āina, 'Ike Wai: Know your home's history and place names,
 the past pathways and spirit of its waters. Water always returns.

2. Kawaikini (multitudinous waters)

Overnight rivers across the island lunge from their paths.
 Kilauea River rises 35 feet within ten minutes.
 Keapana Valley becomes a river.
 Trickle of water along Power-Line road
 swell to rip houses from their foundations
 spilling avalanches of boulders down the hillside.
 Waikomo Stream makes her way into Kōloa homes.

At dark four AM, my friend, a single mother, plunges through water up to her chest,
 with her mother, each carrying one of her three-year-old twins.
 Had they waited five minutes, all would have been swept away.
 In Wainiha a landslide blocked the river
 and the water coursing through another friend's home
 stopped, pooled, and began to circle.
 Then, she says, she really got scared.

Bays turn mud brown, ironwood trees ripped out by their roots rest on reefs.
 Landslides close the highway to Hā'ena in six separate locations.
 Each ahupua'a is cut off, isolated along the coast.
 This coast our kūpuna traveled by canoe and foot trail.

In the floods, the multitudinous waters of Kaua'i returned to their paths,
 reclaimed the character of their names.

Waikomo—water that enters

Wailapa—enlivened waters

Wainiha—waters that rage.

Lesson #1 - Kilo: Reinvigorate observation and connections to 'āina. Educate and prepare.

Lesson #2 - Mālama: Take Care of the Land. Empower groups to plant natives to hold slopes; clean stream channels and 'auwai, maintain lo'i and green spaces, clear rubbish and invasives, so that water can safely flow to sea.

3. Ho'okahi wai o ka like (the sameness of a single shade of dye—unity)

After the flood the people of Kaua'i went into action.

Off-duty firemen went door to door

to ensure neighbors were safe,

worked for days on end though their own homes flooded.

Surfers on jet skis ferried mothers home to their kids,

kids at sleepovers home to their parents.

People stood shoulder to shoulder, loading food and water, tools and chainsaws on to boats running down the coast to cut off areas.

Neighbors mucked out homes, dried photo albums,

took muddy bedding to wash and return folded,

lugged wet mattresses that strangers with trucks showed up to haul away.

A young mother of three created a google survey on 'ohana needs.

Moms took it door to door in their own neighborhoods across the island, then went back and back again, till people felt comfortable asking for help.

Cooks set up kitchens to feed flooded families and volunteers.

Operators on excavators and Bobcats cleared mud as high as the power lines, making it possible for state crews to access the highway within four days.

People saw needs and responded, applied their skills,

found ways to help, and just jumped in.

Lesson #1 - Pilina: Know your neighbors and look out for one another.

Lesson #2 - Mākaukau: Develop community-led disaster management and action plans; don't rely on outside or official response.

Lesson #3 - Ho'ona'auao: Reinforce existing community capacity, offer training in needed areas.

4. Mohala i ka wai ka maka o ka pua—

(Flowers thrive where there is water, as people thrive in good living conditions)

Kaua'i is not new to natural disasters.

When asked how her family survived Hurricane 'Iniki in 1991,

Aunt Anabelle Pa Kam responded . . .

"I guess the way we grew up, because we never had money, money was nothing to us. You know, everything was hand-me-down. And I was happy to have the hand-me-downs. We didn't need anything new. We learned survival. That's how, when 'Iniki came, we could live. We didn't need anything. We could live off the land. And that's what I teach my children and my grandchildren, how to live off the land."

In Kilauea town, after Hurricane 'Iniki,

work groups collected sheets of tin roofing blown off homes,

hammered and straightened them, then went house to house

nailing them up so everyone had dry places to live.

Groups of women made lunch for the workers, kids brought ice and soda.

Families moved in with neighbors, cooking meals together.

In a hurricane everyone is affected, homes damaged,

no water, no electricity, all together.

In a flood, some people's homes are obliterated.

In those that stand, black mold creeps up walls.

While others' lives go on as if nothing happened.

Lesson #1 - Ea: Increase self-sufficiency through local food production and job diversification. Create jobs in mālama 'āina.

Lesson #2 - Hana: Employ locals for post-disaster roles and funnel relief funding directly to communities. Fund positions and people, not just infrastructure.

Lesson #3 - Lōkahi: Build partnerships between communities and all levels of government, enhance communication, and devolve decision-making.

5. Waiwai (plentiful water, riches or wealth)

'Āina, left alone to rest, will recover.

Many resources will replenish on their own.

Without tourists packing the beaches,

Turtles returned to dig nests,

schools of fish spilled into shallows

empty of snorkelers to feed

crabs burrowed into sand undisturbed by footprints.

Local families also returned,
no fighting for parking, hustling to beat the crowds,
bringing their kids to experience ‘āina
the way they knew it as kids
and never thought it could be again,
renewing connections to ancestral places,
gathering to practice and restore.

How can people reside and raise families in the places they grew up?
How can they care for ‘āina they can no longer access?
How can we have quality tourism without bringing ever more visitors?
How can homes wash away without contaminating the ocean,
shorelines move to accommodate the sea?
How to capture abundant water for when there is drought,
deliver emergency aid and communication by drone?
How to create jobs caring for ‘āina that help ‘ohana to thrive?
How can communities stay close as they grow?

In April of 2018, there was no loss of life.
No high surf to push the water back to land.
A chance to reflect, reset, and reimagine,
work to create a new system
while living in the one we have.

Lesson #1 - A‘o aku, A‘o mai: It was a miracle no one died, a blessing and
chance to learn.

Lesson #2 - ‘Āina: Our environment is changing. Pay attention. Cultivate
natural infrastructure to catch water and cultivate resilience.

Lesson #3 - Huliau: Don’t work to return to “normal.” Let places rest. Limit
visitors in vulnerable areas. Rethink rebuilding and zoning. In a previously
unimagined present, re-envision the future.

Ho‘omoe wai kāhi ke kāo‘o . . .

Let us all travel together like water flowing in one direction . . .

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