

New book reflects marvel of Hawaiian fishponds

DURING a trip to Molokai last summer, I read an article in the local newspaper about Hawaiian fishponds. The story talked about the makaha or gate in each pond, a device that allows water to circulate and small fish to enter but keeps large fish from escaping.

I couldn't picture it.

"Where are Molokai's fishponds?" I asked at a state office in Kaunakakai. "Just about everywhere you look," I was told, and then was given directions to Ualapue, an ancient, state-owned pond being renovated.

I drove to the place, parked, then headed toward a partially rebuilt stone wall, about 3 feet wide, that separated the pond from the ocean. The place was deserted at the moment but I had a strong feeling that a lot of dedicated hard work had gone on here, both in ancient and modern times.

I stepped onto the wall, then walked toward an opening that I thought was the makaha. It was. I stepped over it and watched water from the incoming tide rush through the grated opening as well as through the rocks of the wall. Seeing it made it obvious how this simple yet elegant system worked.

I stayed on that wall for a long time, watching nature work the pond while the tradewinds howled and little waves splashed against the rocks. I enjoyed this picture of old Hawaii blending with new.

Eventually, I spoke with the pond's keeper, Billy Kalipi Jr., who patiently shared his extensive knowledge of fishpond aquaculture while I scribbled notes madly.

Later, in my efforts to decipher those notes, I read some articles about Hawaiian fishponds but I still felt that I was missing major points. Why, I wondered, has no one written a book about this interesting and unique aquaculture of the past?

Now Carol Araki Wyban, author, artist and fishpond consultant, has. I spotted the book, "Tide and Current, Fishponds of Hawaii," recently published by the University



OCEAN WATCH

By Susan Scott

a technical-type book written with some personal feeling is a rare and wonderful find.

Wyban writes: "Contrasts of past and present were always with me at the pond. I pondered ancient ways and how they intersected with our experiences. In many ancient cultures the hunter worshipped the hunted. . . . The internal process of this atavism remains the same for us. Clear-eyed and sheathed in silver, we marvel the beauty of the fish."

But the book is by no means all personal experience. The second section is about how the ancient Hawaiians built and managed their ponds; the third section discusses fishponds of the future.

You can learn some local biology in this book without battling with jargon. How big is a .95-millimeter mullet egg? "About the size of the dot of an i," explains Wyban. Also, Wyban's clear drawings of fish and pond details help in understanding how both the ancient and modern systems work.

As I read this book, my visits to some of Molokai's 70 or so ancient fishponds came alive, and so did some of the stories Kalipi told me. With Wyban, I marvel at how these ancient people "made the leap from catching fish to growing fish."

In this age of depleted fish stocks and growing demand, this concept is key. If, like Kalipi and the Wybans, today's aquaculturists add modern technology to ancient techniques, perhaps Hawaii's fishponds can ease some of the strain on our coastal resources.

Susan Scott is a marine science writer and author of three books about Hawaii's environment. Her *Ocean Watch* . . .