

# Ho‘oku‘ikahi Aloha Moloka‘i

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In 2008, I (Malia Akutagawa) had a dream. I saw the profile of Moloka‘i nestled in the heavens, floating on a sea of clouds. It glistened like silvery dew, and it gave me an overwhelming sense of happiness and peace. This image held greater life and substance than the “real” lived experience of Moloka‘i. This floating island held the promise of what we could become, what we have ached for—an island of prosperity and a living legacy of ‘āina momona.

Nu‘umealani, the raised place in the heavens, is where our Moloka‘i was manifested. It was then born of Hina into the physical realm. This promise was made from the beginning, at the heralding of Moloka‘i’s birth:

Loa‘a Moloka‘i, he akua, he kahuna  
He pualena no Nu‘umea

*Born is Moloka‘i, a god, a priest  
The first morning light from Nu‘umea*

Through that dream, I knew that we needed to create a movement for sustainability on Moloka‘i based on kupuna understandings of ‘āina momona, designing for an abundant future rather than adopting a deficit mentality, as is the prevailing attitude of our times. In 2017, Senator J. Kalani English invoked the imagery for climate change adaptation present in the mokulana, the floating islands known to our ancestors. These islands typically appear at twilight above the horizon, as islands of abundance, peace, and equality, where the gods and Kānaka walk together.

I shared my dream with community members in our working group as we organized a conference in 2009 to spark a sustainability movement. At the conference Pwo Navigator Nainoa Thompson spoke these words:

We need Moloka‘i in Hawai‘i. We need you to succeed at what you are contemplating today. Because I really believe that we are in an enormous crisis, both here locally and on the earth. We are in trouble . . . .

Nainoa then shared how his father, Myron B. Thompson, described leadership:

You need to understand the power of vision. You need to see your destination . . . .  
[T]he main thing . . . you need to know [is] who you serve . . . . [K]now your

vision, know your values, share it, articulate it. They will come . . . . Define [your community] by those who believe in you . . . and your values . . . [who] come for the purpose to work, to learn, to grow, and to share . . . . Do not compromise planning . . . . [F]igure out every single step that you need to do to make sure that you are successful . . . . (“Molokai Sustainability”)

Nainoa galvanized us to go beyond having a conference to creating our non-profit, Sust'ainable Moloka'i. Our mission is to maintain our island's rich culture and historic legacy of 'āina momona while embracing modern pathways to a sustainable future. Over the past decade we have been focusing primarily on food sovereignty and energy independence. We integrate community education and economic development into these priorities.

At first we focused on permaculture workshops and earthworks with Hawaiian Homesteaders and local farmers. We partnered with the public schools to develop “Farm to School” programs that provided agriculture and nutrition education, established school gardens, and increased student access to healthy food. In 2016, with Harmonie Williams at the helm as Sust'ainable Moloka'i's executive director, we launched our Food Hub and Mobile Market to connect our farmers to local consumers through an online platform and weekly neighborhood deliveries. We've increased access to fresh, healthy, local food, and expanded economic opportunities for our farmers. Currently, we have 800+ customers, and eighteen of our thirty farmers/producers are Native Hawaiian.

When COVID-19 hit, Sust'ainable Moloka'i partnered with other local entities to figure out how we could help those in need, creating the hui Ho'oku'ikahi Aloha Moloka'i (unifying in love for our people of Moloka'i). A dozen organizations, from the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, University of Hawai'i, to the Salvation Army, as well as community volunteers, answered the kāhea. We conducted surveys and discussed the broad range of impacts that COVID-19 was having on our residents. We responded to the effects of the pandemic on our people's mental health. We organized wellness checks and chore services for our kūpuna living alone and no longer able to attend adult day care, due to quarantine requirements. Several hui members secured masks, baby and adult diapers, menstrual products, reef-safe sunscreen, toiletries, and other supplies. We contacted lā'au lapa'au practitioners on Moloka'i, and Keoki Baclayon on O'ahu, a lā'au lapa'au instructor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Kamakākūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, to conduct virtual workshops on preparing native herbal medicines that boost immunity and help with respiratory symptoms associated with COVID-19.

Our main priority has been supplying food for needy families. We opened up more public schools to provide “grab and go” meals for our keiki. Several organizations in our network had their employees transport meals to remote communities in company vans. We found refrigeration and bulk food storage space in restaurants,

the old Maunaloa grocery store, Moloka'i Cooling Plant, and Matson for the boxes we prepared for the foodbank. The Moloka'i Community Health Center offered its commercial kitchen free for preparing food for families in need.

We organized our hunters to supply venison to families without access to meat. One of our board members Eric Co and his wife offered their family ranch as a site for Mana'e (east end) hunters to hunt. The 'Aha Kirole worked with other large private landowners such as Pu'u O Hoku Ranch and a hunting hui to provide meat. Our local slaughterhouse, the Moloka'i Livestock Cooperative, allocated certain days when its staff would do custom-cut and packaging of venison for broader community distribution. Matt Yamashita, another Sust'ainable Moloka'i board member and fisherman, organized a hui to provide akule and ta'ape for four hundred to eight hundred families. We worked with the network of farmers in our already existing Sust'ainable Moloka'i food hub and online mobile market to supply produce. Various funders supported Sust'ainable Moloka'i as the clearinghouse for distributing the necessary money for supplying families through the foodbank. Since April 2020, we have consistently been supplying an estimated 9,000 pounds of Moloka'i-cultivated produce, taro, fish, shrimp, and grass-fed beef.

When our largest grocer, Friendly Market, discovered that two of its workers tested positive for COVID-19, it had to close its doors for several weeks. This had a domino effect, since the remaining smaller grocery stores could not viably supply the island's needs. Due to social distancing requirements, car lineups were a mile long, and patrons had to wait six hours to get their groceries from Kualapu'u Market. Hawaiian Airlines and Makani Kai offered free air cargo grocery shipments from O'ahu. Our local food hub and mobile market also served as a critical lifeline for families needing groceries.

Even before COVID, we were staged to increase Moloka'i's food security. In May 2020, we distributed 150 'ulu trees to families to plant in their backyards. In 2019, we launched a series of Farmer Trainings to develop fifty new enterprises. The program includes (1) a garden to farm course, in partnership with UH CTAHR Extension Services, (2) chicken egg production workshops, in partnership with Asagi Hatchery, and (3) internships, in partnership with local farmers, offering paid hands-on experience.

Moloka'i's natural resources are relatively healthy. Many of our people can still feed ourselves through subsistence fishing, hunting, and gathering. Adding to the natural bounty the 'aina provides, Sust'ainable Moloka'i had the vision of increasing community capacity and strengthening our local food systems. We have worked tirelessly at realizing this vision for the last decade. Our power rests in community. We listened to Nainoa Thompson when he urged us to hold strongly to our vision of 'aina momona. We have been calling forth the floating island of abundance as the birthright of Moloka'i, he pualena no Nu'umea. And because of this, we could respond effectively to a crisis like COVID-19.

In his 2009 keynote address, Nainoa adjured us with these final words, whose significance are not lost upon us as we reflect on our kuleana to all of you:

When you guys set the course, you are setting it for us. When you are successful, we will succeed. When you become powerful, we will be empowered. When you become intelligent and educated, teach us. . . . I sense that the course you’re taking is what you all believe is absolutely the one you gotta take . . . one you cannot let fail.

### **Works Cited**

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