Hawaii’s Hokulea Canoe Tells Story of Polynesian Voyage

Author’s Note: The Hokulea voyaging canoe in Hawaii symbolizes a longing that many travelers worldwide now feel during the COVID-19 crisis—the wish to get out and explore. Hokulea and similar re-created voyaging canoes recall one of the most inspiring migrations in human history—how Polynesian South Seas people discovered and populated Hawaii.

By Lee Foster

“Who were the original Hawaiians?” and “How did they get to Hawaii?” are beguiling questions a traveler can raise.

In our 21st century context, a further question arises, “How can we best protect and
How Did Humans Reach Hawaii?

The phenomenon that humans ever reached Hawaii ranks with the major accomplishments of mankind.

Hawaii is one of the most remote places on Earth. The islands are fully 2,000 miles from the nearest inhabited places in the South Pacific. It takes five hours by jet to get there today from the South Pacific or from the U.S. mainland. Imagine what time it took for a sailing craft from the South Pacific, headed north to an unknown destination.

Earliest Sailings of Hokulea-like Canoes

The original inhabitants of Hawaii likely came from the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific about A.D. 250-450. Later migrations probably came from Tahiti. Tahitians had the skills to make the journey in both directions.

The knowledge of navigation and the personal self-confidence that allowed these people to sail in relatively small deep-sea voyaging canoes over this huge distance are inspiring.

One wonders how many ill-fated canoes missed the Hawaiian Islands and
disappeared anonymously in the abyss of history and the ocean.

It is said that some DNA evidence amongst Alaska tribal groups links them to the South Pacific peoples. More detective work on this matter would be welcome.

On a relatively small double-hull canoe these explorers would have needed to carry their water, food, seeds to plant for more food, tools, livestock and familiar animals (such as pigs, chickens, and dogs), plus sufficient childbearing women to reproduce themselves.

Re-created Canoe Hokulea

The historic voyages have been re-created by the canoe, called the Hokulea, now a cultural icon at the Hawaiian Maritime Center in Honolulu.

The Hokulea has made the voyage several times, even with little dependence on modern navigation aids. Hokulea sails using the skills of modern Hawaiians. A group of aficionados built the canoe in 1975 and called themselves The Polynesian Voyaging Society.

In 1976 the Hokulea sailed down to Tahiti and back, a feat it repeated in 1980. In 1985-1987 the double-hull canoe made a voyage of discovery throughout the South Pacific, visiting many remote islands. During a 1995 voyage the Hokulea made record time going to Tahiti and Micronesia.

Hokulea means “Star of Joy,” after a star, Arcturus, that hangs over the islands.

Any traveler can look in Honolulu at the Hokulea or its sister ship, the Hawaii Loa, if the ships are in the water and not in dry-dock for rot repair or out voyaging. Within the adjacent museum at the Maritime Center, exhibits show many details about the Hokulea.

Hokulea Promotes Hawaiian Pride

The Hokulea exerts a dramatic influence on the resurgence of pride and self-confidence in Hawaiians and South Pacific Islanders. Nainoa Thompson speaks
eloquently to this point.

“We built the Hokulea in a dark period,” says Nainoa. “Hawaiians were not then proud of who they are. We were navigating ‘cultural change’ as much as the oceans.”

Nainoa recalls his conflicted youth, when his grandmother spoke with pride of her own grandfather, an independent fisherman. The she averted her eyes as she discussed the more recent Hawaiian period, when people were beaten with sticks for simply being Hawaiian.

“Hawaiian had a negative connotation,” adds Nainoa. “People tried to wash the brown off their skin.”

**Young Nainoa**

Young Nainoa came under the influence of an artist, Herb Kane, who was obsessed with images of the great open-hulled canoes that the ancients must have used to cross the oceans. Kane instilled in Thompson and others the dream of building such a canoe. The canoe would recreate the voyages and raise the pride of the people. Ancestors accomplished feats of monumental voyages. Many skills contributed to success. The ocean is a severe and unforgiving adversary for anyone who ventures out unprepared.

“We dreamed that the voyages would bring dignity to people,” says Nainoa. “We could take our anger about our self-image and put it to a positive use. Our language and culture were asleep, but perhaps the re-created voyages would wake us all up.”

**Ancient Skills of the Hokulea Mariners**

A South Seas navigator who still had the skills, named Mau Piailug, helped in the quest. The first 2,500-mile voyage from Hawaii to Tahiti was successful in 31 days, but Mau Piailug resigned because he felt the crew did not have the discipline required. Nainoa himself, full of fear, became the leader of the voyage back to Hawaii, which he made without incident.
On the next voyage south, the canoe capsized while still in Hawaiian waters and a legendary surfer and lifeguard among the crew, Eddie Aikau, died. A dark period of introspection followed. Was this voyaging worth the risk? Out of this traumatic time a new leadership team emerged with far greater navigational skills.

“The voyaging canoe was like a needle making a lei of the islands, the flowers of the South Pacific,” says Nainoa.

The navigational skills, archaeology, and modern genetics that are a part of this story are all intriguing.

It is believed that the sweet potato came onto the scene from South America, so there must have been some contact, but the migration probably came from Asia.

**Did Some Canoes Go to Alaska?**

Recent genetic studies tend to confirm that Hawaiians came east from Asia through the South Pacific and up to Hawaii. Some Haida natives in Alaska are believed to be part of this genetic heritage. The logs for the new canoe, the Hawaii Loa, came from Alaska.

Voyages from the South Pacific probably ended in roughly the 14th century, partially by a decree of rulers to preserve their blood lines as the dominant class. There were also resource limitations in the Hawaiian islands as populations grew. Mounting huge voyaging expeditions was costly.

“All the science and human factors work together in the Hokulea story,” says Nainoa. “There has been a huge resurgence of pride in these Pacific peoples, both in Hawaii and in the South Pacific. They now have a sense of their historic accomplishments and a reverence for their past.”

**A Remarkable Feat**

The size of the Pacific Ocean within the so-called Polynesian Triangle, with New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Islands as the corners, is simply immense. Finding small islands in this vast 10-million square miles of sea was a remarkable feat.
Because of their careful observations of nature, the ancient sailors had some confidence that there would be land to the north, somewhere. One of their indicators was a land bird, the golden plover. They noted that the plover could only set down on land, not at sea. The people of the Marquesas saw that the golden plover migrated to their islands from the north, but did not nest there. Rather, the birds disappeared annually to the north. Therefore, the assumption was that they nested somewhere to the north, on land. Modern bird observers now know that the golden plover flies fully 6,000 miles north to nest in Alaska, far beyond Hawaii.

Knowing there was land up there somewhere, the navigators still had to be able to reckon direction to go north. They developed a method of navigation known as ‘wayfinding,’ totally dependent on natural signs. Nainoa Thompson has these same uncanny skills.

**A Wayfinder’s Skills**

The wayfinding navigator must be able to guide the canoe without any instruments beyond his own mind. At dawn and dusk, of course there is the rising and setting sun. But at midday, the direction of the waves and swells would be the key. And at night, the rising and setting positions of about 210 key stars were critical. As people with an oral rather than a written tradition and with huge capacities for memory, remembering the stars was a critical knowledge to master.

Other clues would be the way clouds form near islands, especially around islands with peaks. The presence of birds, such as boobies, would also be evidence that islands were near. The flight path of birds would be a directional clue. Drifting debris would be another sign as to the direction of and existence of islands. How long would a drifting leaf remain green before deteriorating? How many days had it drifted? Given the wind and wave speed, how far away was the source of the green leaf?
Motivation for Exploration

One also wonders what motivated these people to venture north toward Hawaii. The early assumption was that war, overpopulation, and strife stimulated people to seek new territory. However, the planning required to launch the canoes and the huge amount of social cooperation needed for the venture suggest that there were more positive motivations. A spirit of adventure may have been one of the motivating factors.

Outfitting the canoe was a complex task. Perhaps 20 people traveled on these small double-hull crafts. At least five couples would be needed to produce offspring not adversely inbred. The voyage would last about 30 days.

The threat of becoming becalmed in the middle of the ocean was real and would have been fatal.
Captain James Cook, the Englishman who “discovered” Hawaii for Europeans in 1778, certainly had his equals among the many daring Polynesian navigators who “discovered” Hawaii from their bases in the Marquesas or Tahiti.

Insights at the Bishop Museum

More insights into the South Pacific Islanders who settled Hawaii can be gleaned at the Bishop Museum, the major ethnographic facility of the Pacific. This notable museum, in Honolulu, documents early Hawaii and all the islands that contributed to its development.

Every travel destination has ways of enlarging our imagination. The Hokulea is one of the major Hawaiian contributions to our sensibility. A visitor can see in the Hokulea a renewed sense of the grandeur of the human spirit, the spirit of adventure inherent in mankind, and the willingness of the human animal to take on unimaginable risks.

The next time you spend five hours in an airplane flying to Hawaii, consider what a 2,000-mile canoe ride to Hawaii from the South Pacific would have been like. Moreover, realize that the canoe travelers had no certainty that they would ever see land again.

For the modern air traveler, the islands suddenly jump out, magically and improbably, in the middle of the ocean. Imagine the intense emotions of a Marquesan about A.D. 250-400, who spots land after 30 days at sea during a voyage into the unknown.

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The Hokulea has inspired a new generation of voyaging canoes with grand visions. In 2011 five of the canoes sailed all the way from the Cook Islands to my home in San Francisco. The Cook Islands mariners and other Polynesian people associated with the canoes came to entertain and to instruct. Instruction was about stewardship of the sea and how these Polynesian people can help lead the cause. The boat captain led the crew in an impassioned chant. (See my video of this event, above, or at its YouTube home at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezBiaDbST9w.)

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The Hokulea: For Further Information

The organization managing the Hokulea is the Polynesian Voyaging Society. Their office is at Pier 7 in the Hawaii Maritime Center in Honolulu. They will know, on any given day, the precise location of the voyaging canoe. Contact them in advance of a visit. Details at http://www.hokulea.com/.

Contact the Hawaiian Visitors Bureau at https://www.gohawaii.com/.