

# Connection to 'āina critical to health among native Hawaiians

October 1 2020, by Theresa M Kreif

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The Waimānalo Limu Hui and other volunteers have worked to restore limu in Waimānalo. Here, pōhaku (rocks/stones) from the beach have been wrapped in lei limu. Credit: LeShay Keli'iholokai

Holistic cultural practices that foster a connection to 'āina (land) are important in improving the health of Kānaka Maoli (Indigenous Peoples of Hawai'i), according to a new study from public health researchers at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The findings were published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

For Kānaka Maoli, practices such as growing their own food, taking care of 'āina, and cleansing through hi'uwai (bathing in the sea or a stream), are needed for physical, spiritual, emotional and [mental health](#).

UH Mānoa Office of Public Health Studies researchers LeShay Keli'iholokai, Samantha Keaulana, Mapuana C.K. Antonio and their colleagues conducted interviews and small focus groups with 12 Kānaka Maoli adults living in Waimānalo, including eight kūpuna (elders), to learn about Kānaka Maoli perspectives on [health](#).

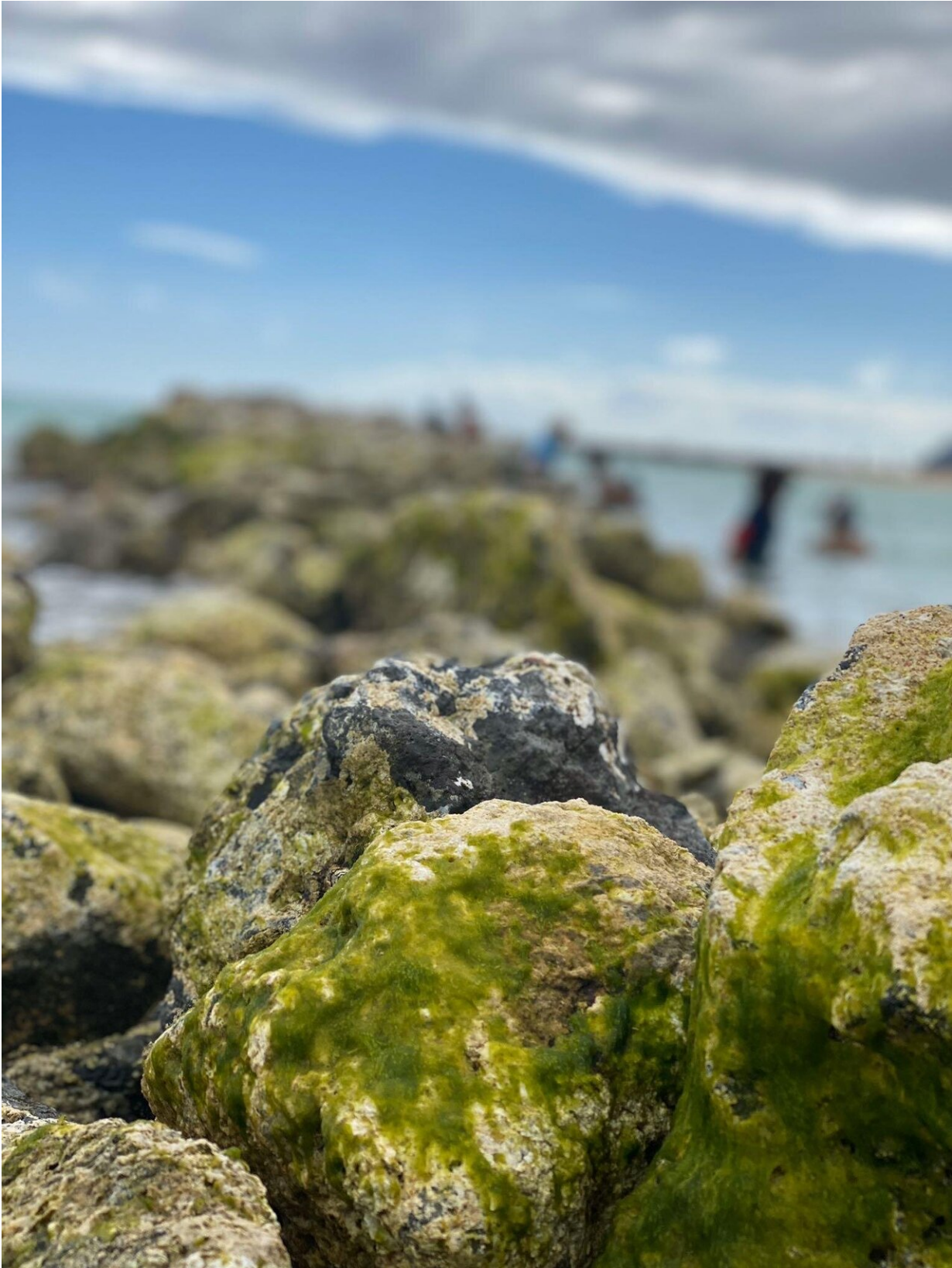
"Imbalances, such as disconnection between 'āina and Kānaka, create ma'i (sickness) in Kānaka Maoli," said Keli'iholokai, who is also a board member of Ke Kula Nui O Waimānalo and Waimānalo Limu Hui.

The researchers analyzed the interview transcripts to identify key themes. Results showed that the participants viewed themselves as part of 'āina.

"Kānaka Maoli view themselves as deeply connected with 'āina, and there is no separating 'āina from Kānaka," said Antonio, an assistant professor of Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Health. "The connection

between 'āina and people is spiritual and reciprocal, and important to well-being and resilience."





The Waimānalo Limu Hui has been restoring Pāhonu, the look i'a (fish pond) once used for turtles, in Waimānalo. Pōhaku (rocks/stones) are pictured with limu growing on them. Credit: LeShay Keliiholokai





On a work day on Pāhonu, Kānaka Maoli rebuild a wall. Credit: LeShay Keli'iholokai

## **‘Āina as physical, emotional and spiritual healing**

A second theme that emerged was the Kānaka Maoli view of ‘āina as physical, emotional and spiritual healing. The participants said they could innately tell when a person was not connected to ‘āina, and when a person did not mālama (take care of) ‘āina. The intergenerational knowledge of the role of ‘āina in health was passed down as wisdom from the kūpuna to the rest of the ‘ohana (family).

A third theme was that Kānaka Maoli view colonization as disruptive to their values and their connections with ‘āina. Addressing the health disparities that stem from colonization will require healing the displacement and disconnection from ‘āina felt by Kānaka Maoli.

"Colonization resulted in [negative impacts](#) from outsiders and foreigners that led to attacks and desecration of ‘āina, and therefore, to the health of Kānaka Maoli," said Keaulana, a doctoral student UH Mānoa's [public health](#) program. "Community initiatives are needed for community healing."

**More information:** LeShay Keli'iholokai et al. Reclaiming ‘Āina Health in Waimānalo, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17145066](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17145066)

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