

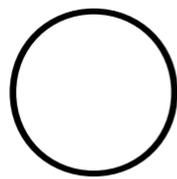
Forbidden Island

BY DAVID BURNEY, Ph.D.

The Hawaiian Island of Niʻihau, although technically part of the United States, is probably less known to most Americans than any other part of the country. Just under 18 miles to the southwest of the major international tourist destination of Kauaʻi lies the mysterious “Forbidden Island.” This nickname is apt, because it is the invitation-only property of the legendary Robinson family, descendants of the Scottish Sinclairs who bought the island from King Kamehameha V in 1864 for \$10,000 and a baby grand piano.

It is also, in a sense, the last stronghold of Hawaiian as the primary language and where Hawaiian culture has been passed down directly from the ancestors for centuries with little intervention from Western culture — except for the residents’ strong Christian faith. Owners of this island have kept the modern world at bay to a remarkable extent. In recent years the population, which almost certainly contains a higher percentage of people of nearly pure Hawaiian ancestry than any other, has been slowly decreasing — from about 200 to recently where less than 40 residents were on the island for several months at a time — as families seek employment opportunities along Kauaʻi’s south shore or farther afield. The Robinson’s enterprises on the island until of late included the cattle and sheep ranch, a charcoal-making operation utilizing the invasive kiawe trees, and a honey business whose yearly production was measured in tons.

Picture above: Kamehameha V, King of the Sandwich Islands. Copyright: Corbis.



One of the island's most famous traditional industries is, however, still very much alive and wherever Niihauans have migrated: the creation of the coveted Ni'ihau shell lei. The dry, heavily grazed island lacks many of the showy flowers used to make lei on other islands, but the entire populace can be seen along the beaches at prime seasons, picking up the tiny shells they meticulously transform into incredible jewel-quality lei. A good multi-strand Ni'ihau shell lei made in the old style can fetch several thousand dollars. One given to Captain James Cook in 1778 is on display in the British Museum.

Beyond the one substantial village of Pu'uwai, the rest of the 70 square-mile island is mostly a wilderness that is just as unique as its human residents. This geologically old island (as old or older than Kaua'i) has a range of mountains on the north with thousand-foot cliffs dropping down to the ocean on the northeast side. Much of the rest of the island is pastureland, that most of the time (particularly in recent years), is too dry to produce ample forage for the cattle, sheep, and more exotic browsers that roam about. The thorny kiawe woodlands look more like Africa than Hawai'i, and sport a strange mix of peculiar creatures, not just the feral Polynesian pigs, and sheep hybridized with wild sheep from Eurasia, but also very large African antelopes such as eland and oryx. The Robinsons run a private tour business (www.niihau.us) that includes half-day helicopter excursions as well as big-game hunting safaris.

The remote beaches of the island are the haunts of many endangered Hawaiian monk seals. On a recent count that reached only about three-quarters of the way around the island, state biologists Don Heacock and Jeff Walters counted 44 of these ancient marine mammals. Large numbers of Hawaiian green sea turtles feed just offshore on the vast seaweed beds, and the waters support fish populations that have responded well to the relatively light fishing pressure exerted by the subsistence fishing of the small population. Increasingly, though, an influx of sport and commercial fishermen who cross the channel from Kaua'i are competing with the monk seals and Niihauans for the marine resources.

Remarkably, the largest lakes in the State are found in the low, flat midsection of the island. These seasonal "playa" lakes fill up during winter storms and as Heacock enthuses are "absolutely teeming with zooplankton," tiny aquatic



creatures that, lacking the exotic fish that inhabit the shallow waters in much of the archipelago, provide sustenance for hundreds of Hawaiian Stilts, large wading birds with bold black and white feathers and very long, bright red legs. Other endangered Hawaiian waterbirds, such as the Hawaiian Coot and the State Bird, the Hawaiian Goose or Nene, are likewise attracted to the large, shallow lakes.

The migration of Ni'ihau people to Kaua'i is nothing new. In ancient times, they often moved back and forth, growing really fine 'uala (sweet potatoes) on Ni'ihau when rains were good. These were traded in vast numbers to Captain Cook and subsequent European voyagers. Just as they do now, many people shifted back to the wetter Garden Isle when times were dry. Today, the community must adapt itself to the many temptations of the outside world, while seeking to acquire marketable skills and find jobs. The Ke Kula Ni'ihau o Kekaha charter school, a Hawaiian-language immersion school on Kaua'i's West Side, is one of the institutions that has risen to the occasion, providing the youngsters with the skills to adapt and thrive in the larger world, while seeking to help them preserve their language and heritage.

In our own small way, my wife and I have tried to help through the establishment of a small non-profit organization on Grove Farm property called

the Makauwahi Cave Reserve (www.cavereserve.org), on Poipu Beach. Thanks to funding from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and other sources, we maintain a jobs-training program aimed specifically at helping this community. Participants in the program help care for the remarkable limestone cavern on the property, where up to 20,000 visitors per year learn about Hawaiian natural history and Polynesian culture at the richest fossil and archaeological site in the islands. On the surrounding 17 acres, participants also tend the thousands of native Hawaiian plants and Polynesian cultivars we have planted, learning landscaping techniques, native species conservation, and public interpretation. In exchange, the inhabitants have taught us how to grow taro and other local crops in the manner of the original Niihauans. Skills they bring to the Reserve's offerings include some of the sweetest singing and ukulele playing you will hear anywhere in the islands — and making shell lei and other advanced Hawaiian crafts. When they "graduate" from the program, we help them find more employment. So even as their numbers on this beloved enclave dwindle, the people of the Forbidden Island are making their way in the bigger world, keeping Ni'ihau's truly special Spirit of Aloha in their hearts...even as they share it with an admiring world. ♣

Above: Mama Ane Kanahale, the octogenarian matriarch of the Ni'ihau clan, lay preacher, and one of the best living makers of the legendary Ni'ihau shell lei. Photo: Lida Pigott Burney.

