

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.

I WONDER WHAT THE SHARK SAW. Fifty legs swirling in the sands, it must have looked like a tribal water dance. Could she hear all that laughter?

Twenty-five sacred site guardians were gathering on Maui for ceremony before heading to IUCN's World Conservation Congress in Honolulu in early September. Altaian nature park founder and spiritual leader Danil Mamyev requested this pre-meeting. Danil has told me several times as we travelled to conference centers for international meetings, "If we can link the guardians, we link the sacred places and strengthen the energetic network. Through ceremony, the caretakers, the cultures and the sacred sites all grow stronger." Our Native Hawaiian friends from the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana were eager to help. Everyone agreed that before launching the dialogue and politics we needed to ask permission, and then bless—and hopefully be blessed—by a sacred place.

In just two days time we would take a boat to uninhabited Kaho'olawe to be

Aloha 'Āina: Love This Land

BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

dropped in the ocean, beyond the breaking waves. We would then swim to shore, and pass all of our tents, sleeping bags, cameras, food and water to the island, hand to hand, while standing in the surf. At least the men from the islands of Papua New Guinea and Borneo, and Caleen Sisk—chief of the Winnemem Wintu, who are salmon people—were good swimmers. Molu Kulu Galgallo, an elder from a desert region in Kenya, had never been in the water before. For Danil's colleagues from Central Asia, it was the first time they'd even seen an ocean.

So, on our second day on Maui, there had to be swimming lessons and a water safety test. It was pretty clear that the Hawaiians were concerned about the Central Asian shamans. "Swim?" asked the mountain men, "Why would we swim? Our rivers are glacial meltwater raging down toward the sea!"

But these guys didn't seem to be afraid of anything. At our safety briefing, Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana leader Davianna McGregor described how in predawn light we would be jumping off a boat into deep water with waves breaking around us—and that two approaching hurricanes might generate bigger swells than normal. The shamans nodded their heads and smiled.

We collected a bunch of life jackets and the guardians walked down to the beach—Altaian snow leopard shaman Slava Cheltuev, Mongolian shaman Oyunbaatar Tseren, and throat-singer Khamil Mamadaliev from Kyrgyzstan, along with a dozen others, plus our Hawaiian test administrators, Syd Kawahakui, Kelvin Ho and CJ Elizares. Into the water we marched.





Emmett Aluli photographs the guardians at the rain ceremony. Danil Mamyev offers water from a sacred mountain in Altai.



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

There was no fear; there was only joy. For a half hour everyone played around, floated in life jackets in the buoyant saltwater, gave or got swimming lessons, splashed each other, and had a raucous good time. Meanwhile, a smiling Caleen filmed it all with her waterproof iPhone.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Luana Busby-Neff. Our radiant ceremonial leader had arrived, standing on sacred ground in sacred water. We shared a big hug and she surveyed the scene. Then I saw Dr. Emmett Aluli of Molokai walking through the waves to join the guardians. Forehead to forehead, we breathed deep aloha.

It was time to have groups of four people swim out to CJ in deeper water 75 feet away. One by one the dog-paddling and breast-stroking began as each group swam their way out and back. Caleen was talking with Luana, filming, and posting images on social media for her tribe back home in northern California. When everyone had finished, and passed, their swim tests, I called over to Caleen, “Hey, you need to do the test, too!” Luana offered, “I’ll swim out with you,” and she and Caleen headed out as the rest of us walked through the water toward dry sand.

Suddenly, people on the beach were pointing and yelling, frantic and loud: “Shark!”

My immediate thought was, “They’re just teasing, trying to get some kid out of the water so they can go home.” But the yelling intensified and then, not ten feet away, halfway between us and the dry sand, a white fin glided past from left to right, slicing

elegantly through a small breaking wave. Whoa!

I felt disbelief, awe and a slow-rising tide of total panic as we splashed through the water to the safety of the shore. Turning around, I could

see Caleen, Luana and CJ out in deep water, just starting to head back our way as the chorus on the beach continued screaming and waving. Right on cue, the glistening white fin, followed by a smaller tail fin, cut gently back through the blue-green water, heading back up the coast.

As Caleen tells it, she and Luana swam out to CJ, and Caleen casually asked him if there were sharks around. CJ pointed over his shoulder and said, “They would be out in deeper water.” To which Caleen responded, “I saw *Jaws*. I know they come right to shore!” Just then, the echoing cry drifted out from the beach. Apparently, Luana took one big stroke toward shore, but Caleen grabbed her foot and said, “No you don’t girl! You’re with me. We are staying close!” as they all began to swim in.

They made it ashore without incident. After a few minutes of trying to calm ourselves down, Caleen said, “If I see a bear, I know what to do. Same with a rattlesnake. If I see a wolf or a mountain lion, I have information on file in my brain. Spirit beings in my place, I know. When I saw that shark, there was nothing, no file, no information, no frame of reference,” she laughed. “Just images from *Jaws*.”

Standing on the beach, we were all still full of adrenaline and excitement as our

Native Hawaiian hosts gathered around. “I have never seen a shark here,” said one. “I saw it from the cliff. It was a hammerhead,” said another, gesturing a wide snout. “It was white,” said a third. Luana said, “I’ve been coming to this beach for swim tests for 35 years and I’ve never seen a shark here.”

We lingered on the beach a while longer. I finally said, “I guess we’d better head back,” and just as I lifted my foot and started to turn, there in a breaking wave, making one last pass, swam the white-finned manifestation of the ocean god, a stunning form of Kanaloa.

“It’s a she,” said Luana. “I can feel it. Friendly. Very gentle.”

“*Ho’ailona?*” I asked. A sign from nature?

“Big time,” said Luana.



The following day, we journeyed halfway up Haleakala volcano to a rain shrine that faces Kaho’olawe. Luana led a beautiful ceremony as each guardian offered water from their homeland, pouring a stream onto a rock altar, and of course it rained!

At dawn the next day, we crossed seven miles of ocean to find small waves welcoming our delegation and everyone joyously swam to shore. We visited sacred sites,

learned how the value of *aloha ʻāina*—love for the land—led to stopping the U.S. Navy’s test bombing on the island, and the guardians wrote an indigenous declaration to be offered at the World Conservation Congress.

Craig Neff conducted an *awa* ceremony, as we shared the favorite drink of the gods in golden sunset light looking north toward Haleakala. It was a ceremony of gratitude and commitment, as each person expressed thanks and spoke aloud his or her vision for the path ahead. Under the stars, Kamil went into trance and sang some of the *Manas* epic of Kyrgyzstan, *Molu Kulu* and *Ali Gufu Ibrae* danced around the fire and sang songs of Kenyan nomads, and Danil initiated a shaman’s drum given to him by the Mongolians.

We carried strong energy to the meeting of the global conservation community in Honolulu. At one session, Native Hawaiians chanted, told stories and celebrated “Forty

Years of Aloha ʻĀina.” Caleen shared a memorable press conference with the legendary Jane Goodall. The guardians spoke at film screenings and panel discussions. They reworked and issued a powerful declaration that may have contributed to IUCN’s decision to recognize a new category for indigenous organizations, ensuring them membership and a vote at future Congresses. After many meetings and intensive lobbying, the membership passed Motion 26, linking sacred natural sites to official protected areas and World Heritage Sites as “No Go areas” for mining and extractive industries. This IUCN resolution can now be used as a policy mechanism by governments, indigenous peoples and advocacy groups around the world.

After many years, the indigenous rights movement is hitting its stride. At Kahoʻolawe, Mauna Kea, Standing Rock and Shasta Dam, native people stand with each



Nina and Patricia Gualinga (Ecuador) with Jane Goodall, Oussoi Lio Appolinaire (Benin) and Chief Caleen Sisk in Honolulu.

other and their allies—not in protest, but in prayer.



Returning home to California, I awoke one morning thinking about the shark. In a half-conscious state I was back in the ocean, feeling the group of people we had assembled—the life force, the energy, the love for land and water. It struck me: the guardians had called that shark. She felt them, and was checking us out—Nature’s response to a ceremony of gratitude. *Hoʻailona.*

On remote Kahoʻolawe, the sacred site guardians, their interpreters, allies and hosts held planning sessions for the IUCN World Conservation Congress. We filmed one discussion in which it was suggested that a protest be staged in Honolulu, calling out threats from dams, mining, telescopes, tourists, scientists and racism at sacred sites. Here is Luana Busby-Neff’s thoughtful response:

“We’re not here to protest. We are here to affirm. We are here to affirm who we are as a people and our connection to our land, our elements, our peoples, all the peoples, with two feet, four feet, with wings. We are here to affirm. There is a big difference energetically—especially if you are shaman. Affirmation means you’re bringing toward you energy that has a spirit of nobility, that is a spirit of deep love for the place that you come from, for the people you come from. We need to affirm. So, we’re shifting it. We’re changing now. We don’t protest. Protest and you get protests. Defend and you get defense. Affirm and you support the uprightness of your people and your practices, and the interconnection you have with the natural world.

Our holistic worldview as indigenous people is to embody and articulate and bring forth the elegance and the grace and the intelligence of a way of being that is deeply connected to our mountains, our rivers, our streams, our forests, our deserts. So, big difference: we’re not going to

protest. We’re here to express *aloha ʻāina*. *Aloha ʻāina* means to love this land—and the quality and firmness of that *pono* [righteousness].

We don’t need to have angry voices. That’s part of a web that you get stuck in. It’s part of a genocidal practice of people who lay that net out to make us look bad. So easy to get caught up in. No need to react anymore. Respond with uprightness, intelligence, wisdom, nobility, truth, love. Protesting is reactive, small-minded. We’re shifting, upping the bar. We’re moving to another way of how we’re going to do this. Why? Because we come from an ancestral root that has given us everything, that has given us the wisdom and intelligence to be only that. And so our Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻOhana practice here with *aloha ʻāina* is to affirm our connection to the gods, to nature, to our families, to ourselves.

We say *kapu aloha*: speak well. Aloha is not trivial. Aloha is the intelligence to stand up for what you believe in. It’s not a silly thing. It’s a firm commitment to *pono*, meaning: right in action, right in words, right in heart, right in spirit—and you act with all those parts. We are realigning ourselves because we need all parts of us to move, because there’s so much to act against us. So don’t buy it. We are here to affirm. We are here to celebrate. We are here to honor. We are here to ritualize the action we are going to take and the way we are going to act.”

**“We are here to affirm.”
LUANA BUSBY-NEFF**

