



Navigating by the Stars
The Polynesian Voyaging Society
Nainoa Thompson
Hawaii

Nainoa Thompson was in awe when he first saw the Hōkūle‘a, a traditional Polynesian voyaging canoe that navigates by the stars without using any Western implements. In 1976 the Polynesian Voyaging Society's now famous flagship project had set sail from Hawaii to Tahiti, retracing the original journey taken by Nainoa's ancestors, the first time such a vessel had completed this journey in over 600 years. "I was in Tahiti when it arrived," Nainoa says, reflecting back. "17,000 Tahitians flocked to the port—so I climbed up a monkey-tail tree just to be able to watch it make landfall. I didn't know what the future held, but I sensed how historic this moment was. And I knew I was going to be a part of that future somehow."

Nainoa had grown up on a dairy farm in Niu Valley on the island of Oahu when it was still an agricultural community. Here, Nainoa's first teachers were close to the land—and close to home. "My mother was a great inspiration for me. She would always make us go out into the bush, and encouraged us to spend our days in nature. She had the spirit of all the great naturalists, and it rubbed off on me." Another teacher that guided Nainoa was Yoshi Kawano, a family friend and worker who lived on the dairy farm. "Yoshi was my great teacher about the ocean," Nainoa says. "One day he gave me a four-foot bamboo fishing pole and took me to Maunalua Bay. With this gift, I found a place of wonderment where I could really be at peace with myself. As a kid, a lot of things didn't really make sense to me—but the ocean did."

With modernization, industrialization, and an influx of people that the land couldn't support, Niu Valley changed. Nainoa saw two different ways of living, and realized that the effects of this modern approach couldn't be sustained. "Growing up, there was no question as to why the natural world would need to be protected," he says. "To watch the world change so rapidly without being able to do anything about it, and watch the things you value, and love, get destroyed; it was a helpless feeling."

Nainoa devoted himself to learning more about environmental issues, which wasn't easy. "When I was in high school, sustainability wasn't even a word. Climate change wasn't taught. We were really unprepared to deal with these issues in every way." Nainoa also struggled with his Hawaiian identity, since that wasn't taught in schools either. "I realized that people don't care to protect something they have no connection to," he says. "And so I realized why our Hawaiian identity and heritage, which is so deeply connected to this place, was being ignored. Reviving one's understanding would inevitably awaken both. I realized that as a culture going forward, we needed a new kind of teaching so that the next generation of Hawaiians would be better prepared than we were."

In the early 1970s, Nainoa found exactly the community of educators he was looking for with the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS). After witnessing the Hōkūle‘a arrive in Tahiti, Nainoa was eager to learn from these great navigators. "I owe all that I am to the great navigators and educators who gave of themselves to build me up," he says. "Mau Piailug. Katharine Luomala. Ben Finney. And perhaps my greatest influence from a sustainability perspective, Lacy Veach."

Lacy Veach was Hawaii's second astronaut, and he made a great impact on Nainoa's crowning achievement with the PVS, the Worldwide Voyage. "He taught me about the Island Earth, which is how he saw it from outer space. And how fragile and interrelated everything is. It's also when he realized that down on earth, our solutions don't evade us because of an absence of technology, but an absence of culture. He planted the seed that we need millions of trained 'navigators,'

both metaphorically and literally, to build a future of values and education. He saw the parallels between navigating space and the PVS. And he was the one who instructed me to sail Hōkūle‘a around the world to continue to inspire these values.”

“With the Hōkūle‘a, I’ve witnessed the Hawaiian Renaissance in real time,” he says. A government mandate to teach the Hawaiian language has had a profound impact on this island nation. “Before the Hōkūle‘a, there were less than 100 native speakers left on the islands,” Nainoa says. “Now there are more than 22,000 native Hawaiian speakers.”

“The PVS and Hōkūle‘a has given us hope. It’s showed us that we need to change our relationship to the earth, and we need to educate ourselves about how to get back to more sustainable ways. And it’s shown that in navigating by our shared values and navigating by the power of community, we can change anything. To put it simply, our relationship with Hawaii was renewed.”

Nainoa has since devoted his life to reviving ancient Hawaiian traditions that were nearly lost. Whether he is working on cultural preservation, environmental advocacy, or championing sustainable education for Hawaiian youth, he credits everything he’s achieved to the guidance of generous teachers. “I’m not a particularly smart or courageous person. If you read a headline about some of the things I’ve done, you might think that,” he says. “But you’d be wrong. I owe everything I’ve done to the great teachers I’ve been fortunate to learn from in my journey of life.”

Nainoa has been involved with all of the Hōkūle‘a’s voyages after the initial one, and has remained a central navigator for the PVS since the early 1970s. Over a period of 45 years, his voyages have totaled more than 250,000 nautical miles—the equivalent of circumnavigating the earth 20 times. From 2014-2017, the Worldwide Voyage covered 41,000 miles, visited 322 ports, and heard stories from concerned communities all over the world who are suffering from climate change. “It’s clear that if we don’t do anything to combat climate change, there’s going to be a lot of suffering,” Nainoa says. But he adds that there’s reason for hope. “We met extraordinary people doing work in environmental and cultural spaces. We learned from hundreds of Indigenous communities that have been sustained for thousands of years with the common understanding that Mother Earth will take care of it all, if we take care of her.”

Nainoa is now planning the launch of the Moananuiākea Voyage in 2022. “We are planning to circumnavigate the Pacific, since the engine of environment is the Pacific. It regulates climate, food sovereignty, distribution of temperature—all of the most important issues of sustainability for the 21st century.” For this boundary-breaking voyage, Nainoa has advocated for youth involvement at all levels of the process. “We’re mandating that at least a third of the 300-person crew has to be under the age of 25, so that these skills are passed on to the next generation.”

Nainoa is hopeful about the future. “Within weeks of asking for youth volunteers for the Moananuiākea Voyage, we had to start turning people away—which is a good thing. It shows us that the young people are ready to fight for cultural and environmental preservation.” And Nainoa is glad that they are taking up the mantle. “My generation couldn’t crack the code to build a sustainable world, but I think that these amazing young people can—and will.”

If I have courage, it is because I have faith in the knowledge of my ancestors.

Mau Piailug

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