



## DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

DAVID Y. IGE  
GOVERNOR

SUZANNE D. CASE  
CHAIRPERSON

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **AFTER 32 YEARS, NATIVE HAWAIIANS RETURN KOHOLĀ TO KANALOA KAHO‘OLAWE** *Humpback Whale Washed Ashore in Early 1986*

(Honolulu) - The saga of a juvenile koholā (humpback whale) that began in January 1986 when it stranded on the shore of Kūheia on the island of Kanaloa Kaho‘oawe, came to a meaningful closing on August 15, 2018 (Kūpau Moon).

Through a collaborative effort of the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana (‘Ohana), the Kaho‘olawe Island Reserve Commission (KIRC), the Bishop Museum, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service, the koholā was returned to the depths of the offshore waters off of the coast where it had originally beached.

“This koholā brought together entities on how to respond to and care for stranded marine animals,” said Craig Neff who coordinated the return of the koholā on behalf of the ‘Ohana. “Hopefully this experience can set a standard on how to respect, trust and work with all Native Hawaiian practitioners for the best interests of our marine life.”

Michael Nahoopii, KIRC Executive Director said, “This is a good example of finding a balance between management, science and Native Hawaiian cultural practices.”

The island of Kaho‘olawe was controlled by the U.S. Navy for live fire ordnance delivery training from 1941-1990. When the koholā first washed ashore, the Navy turned the matter directly over to NOAA. NOAA then turned the koholā over to the Pacific Whale Foundation which re-constructed its skeleton and featured it in an exhibit at a site in Kīhei. When that exhibit closed in 1988, NOAA transferred the koholā to the Bishop Museum which made it the centerpiece of exhibits at its Hawai‘i Maritime Center until it closed in 2009.

NOAA, which has authority for the retention of marine mammal parts under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, authorized KIRC to assume responsibility for respectfully returning the bones to the ocean off of Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe. According to Neff, “Koholā are kino lau or a body form of Kanaloa, Hawaiian god of the ocean.” The island of Kaho‘olawe, whose ancient name is Kanaloa, is also a kino lau of Kanaloa. Both are sacred. Neff added, “We are grateful to all of the individual volunteers and entities that contributed time and resources to help us return the koholā to Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe with respect and sanctity. It was extraordinary.”

The Bishop Museum arranged for the koholā to be lowered from the ceiling. ‘Ohana members and volunteers dismantled the skeleton and wrapped it for shipment. Matson Navigation Company provided a forty foot container and transportation from the Maritime Center to the dock and to Kahului, Maui. Field Services and Marine donated a crane and services to load the koholā onto the KIRC vessel, the ‘Ohua. The head, alone, weighed 700 pounds.

Early in the morning on August 15th members from the various organizations set out across the Alalākeiki Channel on a mission to return the koholā to the ocean off of Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe. Jonathan Ching, KIRC Commissioner and member of the ‘Ohana described the ceremony as follows, “The natural elements opened up to receive the koholā. The ocean was calm and the wind was still. At mid-channel the sky filled with stars, with the Milky Way directly overhead. Hōkū‘ula (Mars) lay low over the top of Kanaloa Kaho‘olawe and guided the captain, Lopaka White, to Kūheia. The bones of the koholā were slipped quietly into the ocean, and they briefly suspended as they filled with water then gracefully sank to the depths.”

Luana Busby-Neff, who conducted the protocols, said, “This experience demonstrates the value of having Native Hawaiian communities care for our marine animals. We appreciate that NOAA, DLNR and other agencies recognize that Native Hawaiian practitioners root our practices in deep scientific knowledge passed on from our ancestors in combination with constant observation. Hawaiian practitioners are both scientists and practitioners.”

“Let the journey of this koholā serve as a lesson about how much our Native Hawaiian and broader community care about our magnificent and sacred koholā. We can be relied upon to fulfill our kuleana (responsibility) for them,” said Noa Emmett Aluli. “The return of the koholā, provides the continued foundation for the ultimate recognition that Native Hawaiians, like Native Americans, have a role to play in responding to and caring for our stranded marine animals. Ha‘ina ia mai ana kapuana no kēia koholā aloha. Let the story of this beloved koholā be told!” said Aluli.

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**Media Contact:**

Dan Dennison  
Senior Communications Manager  
(808) 587-0396