

# Green Sea Turtles Off Endangered list October 2025: Mālama i nā honu!

[ESME KEALOHA DUDOIT](#)

DEC 03, 2025

---

## Climate and Environmental Education

ResearchHub:

DOI:

ORCID:

Grades 3-12

Green sea turtles, *honu* are my *ohana's 'aumakua* a guardian ancestor from traditional Hawaiian culture, believed to take the form of an animal, plant, or other natural phenomenon to provide guidance, protection, and strength to their living family members.

*Mālama i nā honu* in Hawaiian means “*take care of the Hawaiian Green Sea turtles.*”

The *honu* I filmed here are in front of my family's beach house at Kahana Beach on Maui in Hawai'i.

They showed up on my birthday in 2023 playing so loudly they woke me up.

As I walked outside they began to laugh in the way turtles do when delighted, making splashing noises and calling to me, wishing me a happy birthday.

An *‘aumakua* is a personal or family guardian spirit in Hawaiian culture that is our ancestral guardian, appearing as an animal, plant, or other natural form.

These spirits protect their descendants by providing guidance, warnings, and healing, and families have a reciprocal relationship where they avoid harming the *‘aumakua*'s physical form and also make amends for transgressions, which can be punished by the spirit through illness.

### **Characteristics of an *‘aumakua***

- **Ancestral spirits:** *‘Aumakua* are thought to be ancestors who have transformed to continue watching over their descendants.
- **Manifestations:** They can appear in various forms, such as sharks, owls, sea turtles, eels, lizards, or even plants.
- **Protective role:** They protect their families from danger, provide spiritual guidance, and can heal sickness or wounds.
- **Reciprocal relationship:** Families must respect and care for their *‘aumakua*, and in turn, the *‘aumakua* provides protection.

### **How they interact with families**

- **Guidance and warnings:** An *‘aumakua* may warn or reprimand a family member if they are doing wrong.
- **Punishment:** If a family member behaves poorly (e.g., greed, dishonesty) or violates a taboo (e.g., harming the *‘aumakua*'s physical form), the *‘aumakua* may cause illness as a form of punishment.
- **Atonement:** A family that has offended their *‘aumakua* must repent and ask for forgiveness, often through actions to right the wrong.

- **Afterlife:** After death, an *‘aumakua* can act as a judge, determining whether to reward or punish the spirit based on how the person lived.

The *‘aumakua* are considered sacred protectors and can appear to warn of danger, offer guidance, or bring prosperity. Common examples include sharks (mano), owls (pueo), and hawks (‘io).

### How to define an *‘aumakua*

- **A family guardian:** An *‘aumakua* is an ancestor who has passed away and returned in a spiritual form to watch over their descendants.
- **A spiritual guide:** They are believed to offer guidance, strength, and inspiration to their family.
- **A protector:** They can warn of misfortune or danger and protect family members from harm.
- **A communicator:** *‘Aumakua* can pass prayers to the gods and are thought to hear the words of their family members.

### How to identify your *‘aumakua*

- **Family connections:** Often, a family’s *‘aumakua* is passed down from both sides of the family. You can ask relatives what *‘aumakua* they have. If you see a consistent *‘aumakua* emerge through those connections, it may be yours as well.
- **Livelihood and location:** In the past, an *‘aumakua* was sometimes related to a family’s livelihood. For example, a family that was “ocean people” might have a shark *‘aumakua*, while “mountain people” might have a pueo or ‘io.
- **Personal experiences:** Some people learn about their *‘aumakua* through personal encounters or stories passed down through their family.

In Hawaiian, ***honu*** is **the word for turtle**, most commonly referring to the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*).

The honu is deeply significant in Hawaiian culture, symbolizing wisdom, good fortune, patience, and guidance, and is considered a sacred animal and an important part of the marine environment.

- **Meaning:** The word "*honu*" is a general term for turtle and tortoise, but it is most often used to refer to the green sea turtle found in Hawai'i.
- **Cultural Significance:** Honu are seen as sacred and are associated with:
  - Wisdom and guidance
  - Good fortune
  - Patience and endurance
  - Long life
  - Being a guide for finding one's way in life
- **Legends:** Ancient legends tell of turtles helping to create freshwater ponds and providing guidance, further deepening their importance in Hawaiian culture.
- **Conservation:** The Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle is protected, and there is a cultural emphasis on caring for them, with phrases like *Mālama i nā honu* meaning "take care of the Hawaiian Green Sea turtles".

As of October 2025 the green sea turtle has now improved in status from Endangered to Least Concern according to the latest update to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

After more than four decades listed as Endangered, the global green turtle population has increased by approximately 28% since the 1970s.

This remarkable achievement reflects decades of dedicated conservation efforts worldwide, including protecting nesting beaches, engaging local communities, curtailing trade in turtle products, and reducing fisheries bycatch.

It's a powerful reminder that when we act with determination and coordination, we can reverse the trajectory of species decline.

But this success is not a finish line, but rather an important milestone on an ongoing journey.

*Mālama i nā honu* meaning “Take care of the Hawaiian Green Sea turtles”.

Read the full story about what this means and why the work must continue through the link down below.

**[Green Sea Turtle Conservation](#)**





Kum Hwa  
PHOTOGRAPHY



### Honu at Ho'okipa beach North Shore Maui

These are the green sea turtles (honu) on the North Shore of Maui closer to my home in Haiku. These sacred honu have been protected since 1977. They haul out to rest, lay their eggs, or just sun bathe.

The Hawaiian green sea turtle can grow up to 400 pounds. There can be up to 100 honu at Ho'okipa beach which is a kite surfing, wind surfing and surfing beach along Hana Highway in Paia, Maui.



Ho'okipa Beach, Paia Maui



Ho'okipa Beach, Paia Maui. My local surfing beach and home of a large population of the Hawaiian green sea turtle.









Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle

## Did you know?

***Kākau*** means tattoo in Hawaiian. Many Hawaiians get their ***Ohana's***(family) '***aumakua*** (spirit guide) tattooed on their body.

Photo: ***Kākau*** of my ***Ohana's*** '***aumakua, honu*** running across my back.  
(2013)

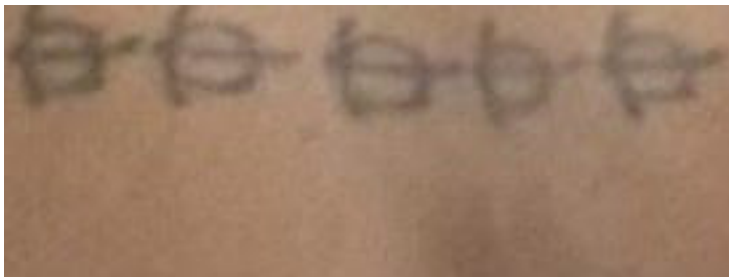


Photo: Esme Dudoit. 2013 Tattoo of my family's ancestral spirit guides, *honu* the Hawaiian green sea turtles on my upper back for protection and guidance.







Photo: Esme Dudoit. Native Hawaiian Kākau on my shins. December 2025



# KĀKAU: TRADITIONAL ART OF HAWAIIAN TATTOOING

Using organic Hawaiian products from nature passed down for generations.



## Kākau: Traditional Art of Hawaiian Tattooing

by MIKE SPENCER

I am a Native Hawaiian of mixed race born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. I am currently the Presidential Term Professor of Social Work at the University of Washington and the Director of Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Oceanic Affairs at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute. I teach courses on diversity and social justice, intergroup dialogue, community organizing, and community development.

*Aloha from Hawaii Dear Students,*

I wanted to share with you a wonderful experience I was able to witness for the first time while here working. I was invited to be a part of Kiha Rodrigues' **uhi** or tattooing.

This was not your typical tattoo parlor though. This was the Native Hawaiian traditional art of tattooing or **kākau**, performed by the only Hawaiian who has received the honor of conducting this ceremony, **Kahuna Kā Uhi (Uhi Master)**, Keli'i Makua.

While I had been aware of this tradition and had said many times that the only way I'd ever get a tattoo was through **kākau**, I had never seen it up close and in person.

I learned a lot of things from Makua, who encouraged me to ask questions. I learned that the English word for tattoo comes from **kākau** or **tātau** as it is known in other parts of the Pacific. The word was brought back to Europe by Captain James Cook on his voyages.

I also learned that not anyone can get a traditional tattoo as Makua has to determine if an individual is ready by getting to know the person and through a personal interview.

There has to be a reason to get the tattoo that is meaningful, such as a connection to one's ancestors and their identity as Hawaiian.

He has tattooed non-Native individuals as well, but again, the meaning must be sincere, deep, and purposeful, not just to appropriate the culture and look good.

Makua also shared that he has seen many changes in people who have received their tattoos. Having the tattoo is a representation of you and your family and your ancestors.

Therefore, it is a visual reminder of your responsibility to your family and your community.

If a person is not representing their family or themselves well, through inappropriate behavior like drugs or excessive alcohol, delinquency, etc., he will deem them not ready.

Makua studied under another master, Keoni Nunes, for over 20 years before he retired and passed on the role to Makua.

Now, Makua works with other students who observe and assist him until they are ready to begin the process of tattooing themselves.

**Kākau** is done with hand tools all created by Makua himself. The piece that penetrates the skin is typically made out of bone and often that of the **Hawaiian albatross** as its bone is hard and not as porous as other bone.

He sharpens this bone to fine points and has tools of differing widths, depending on the area of coverage he wishes to apply the ink.

The ink is traditionally made from the soot of the **kukui** tree nut, but he mostly uses commercial ink today as it lasts longer and performs better.

His apprentices stretch the skin and he applies the bone to the skin and begins to tap with another stick to drive the bone into the skin.

The designs come from past generations and were passed down. He selects unique designs for each individual based on their interview and their genealogy.

I found the process beautiful and mesmerizing. While at first I focused on the pain being felt by Kiha, I later grew to appreciate the meaning and significance of his uhi to him and his identity as a Hawaiian.

I know that he will wear this **uhi** with pride. As for myself, I thought about how this process might be used as part of a social intervention for Native Hawaiians.

Could we possibly take young people who have lost their way and use the promise of an uhi as an incentive for turning their lives around?

Could the process of receiving their **uhi** also lead to their own transformation as they become connected to their past, present and future?

I hope to do a more structured interview with Makua and perhaps recipients of his work to better understand how **kākau** might be a tool for promoting wellbeing.

I think it would make an excellent research project and a way to document this art for future generations!



If you'd like to learn more about Native Hawaiian Kākau:

## **University of Hawaii, Mānoa Resources**

[Resurrection of Uhi](#)

[Traditional Hawaiian Tattooing](#)

[Other articles on tattooing](#)

## *Hawaiian Vocabulary Words To Learn*

Grades 3-7

1. **Write the definition**
2. **Use the word in a sentence**
3. **Share in chat**
1. Honu
2. Kākau
3. Uhi
4. Makua
5. Kukui
6. 'Aumakua
7. Mano
8. Pueo
9. 'Io
10. Ohana

## **Environmental Studies**

Grades 8-12

Write an article about how the green sea turtle increased their population by 25% according to the conservation group. Share in chat.

## Join Esme Kealoha Dudoit's subscriber chat

Available in the Substack app and on web

ResearchHub:

DOI:

ORCID:

- Esme Chloe Kealohaku'u'ipā was a paraeducator from 2002-2007 at Kualapu'u Charter School on Molokai, Hawai'i coordinating all Grade 3-6 Social Sciences *No Child Left Behind* reading and writing intensive programs.
- She began tutoring in middle school and into high school and college. She invented a unique approach at Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies and Mark Twain Junior High in which she used newspapers and magazines to tutor her peers.
- She would ask them to pick something in the newspaper or a magazine that interest them and she would tutor them and help them complete their homework using only that newspaper or magazine article. She was successful in using the sports section to tutor athletes in math who would otherwise fail out of their place on the team. The faculty took notes and filmed her process. She said that students can only learn a subject if it interests them.
- She worked at Greenpeace, USA, Los Angeles in Santa Monica and Greenpeace International, San Francisco focusing on Forest and Oceans Documentary Archives. She attended University of Northwest Switzerland, Basel and Zurich campus for Documentary Studies, and UC Santa Barbara for Marine Biology.
- She attended University of Hawaii, Manoa, where she was a student DJ at UH's KTUH campus radio. A student journalist at Ka'Leo campus

newspaper and worked a campus job in the TOEFL Computer Language Lab with Japanese exchange students in a 40 computer educational lab as a System Administrator to prepare them for the online TOEFL exam.

- She is fully professionally fluent in German and is certified with the State of Hawaii Judiciary as a German (Swiss, Austrian, Standard German) court translator. She worked for Legal Aid with Native Hawaiian clients assisting in searching for deeded land owed to their families.
- She worked at H&R Block to assist with Remote Filing for Cryptocurrency IRS Claims. She is a State of Hawaii Notary Public and Hawaii State licensed Property, Casualty, Health, Life insurance producer. She is currently a Bachelor of Applied Business Information Technology junior at University of Hawaii, Maui.

[https://open.substack.com/pub/esmekealohadudoit/p/green-sea-turtles-off-endangered?utm\\_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm\\_medium=post\\_viewer](https://open.substack.com/pub/esmekealohadudoit/p/green-sea-turtles-off-endangered?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=post_viewer)