As descendents of ancient Polynesian seafarers, early Hawaiians developed a way of life closely connected to Hawai'i's ocean environment. To this day, many Native Hawaiians embrace the sea and its creatures, such as the humpback whale, through unique cultural practices and traditions. The Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary works to affirm these unique ocean-based elements of Hawaiian culture through special education and outreach activities. By doing this, the sanctuary strives to enhance the survival of North Pacific humpback whales and the ocean-based, conservation-oriented culture of Native Hawaiians.

Legend of the Koholō - During the winter, Hawai'i's waters take on a new energy as the Koholō return to their breeding and calving grounds. Natives acknowledged their presence through legendary place names throughout the islands. For example, Koholō-haena (haunting Koholō), refers to locations along the Hāna coast of Maui and at Mā'ili, O'ahu. Lōnī-koholō ki'i (Koholō spirit) refers to the "rings of whales." Pā-aholoholo Hawai'i, one of Hawai'i's largest lagoons (temples), was built upon "whale hill." Built in the 1790's under the direction of Kamehameha I, this lio'ie played an important role in his subsequent rise to power as the ruler of all Hawai'i.

Hawaiian Voyagers - Centuries ago, Hawai'i's ancestors voyaged vast distances across the Pacific, resulting in the development of a unique culture. Voyagers were accomplished observers of their natural surroundings, using the clouds, winds, stars, and currents to guide them safely to their destinations. Voyaging between islands and across the Pacific allowed Hawaiians to explore, trade, and transport materials. Today, new generations explore their ancient culture as traditional canoes set sail in remembrance of Hawai'i's voyagers.

Master Fishermen - For centuries in Hawai'i, entire families were devoted to mastering the art of fishing. Ancient Hawaiian fishing traditions are still stern today, as lawai'a (fishermen) use hooks, lines, and spears to fish during the day, and torches to fish at night. Limu (seaweed) and other resources are also gathered along the shorelines.

Fishing Shrines - To promote the abundance of fish, the lawai'a would pray to one of many fishing deities, such as Kā'īula, for an abundant and successful catch. Kā'īula were also stones that represented the god, or a le'a, whose offerings were left. Many times these le'a-le'a were associated with other le'a, markers that led fishermen to their secret fishing grounds. These le'a were used as landmarks in the same manner that today's fishermen use Global Positioning System (GPS) technology.

The Ahupua'a - A significant part of ancient Hawaiian culture was based on a land division system known as the ahupua'a. From the mountains to the sea, the ahupua'a established many practices such as trading, farming, fishing, and maintenance of resources to flourish under the supervision of a konohiki (manager). By caring and cherishing resources for the land and sea, Hawaiians understood that these resources would in turn, care for the people.

Unique Fishponds - The island's shorelines were once decorated by a lacework of rock-walled fishponds. These ponds evolved from an earlier form of Polynesian aquaculture into the loko-i'a style which is unique to Hawai'i. Encompassing shallow coastal waters up to the shoreline, the loko-i'a walls enclosed an area of water in which Hawaiians could manage and raise fish. A makau (sluice gate) allowed small fish to enter and prevented larger fish from escaping.

Toothed Whales and the Lei Niho Palaoa - Besides the Koholō, palaoa (toothed whale) also frequent Hawai'i's waters. It is believed that when the carcass of a toothed whale, such as the sperm whale, washed ashore, it became kapu (taboo) and was reserved only for the ali'i (ruling class). From this carcass, the teeth (mākähā) were extracted, carved, and made into a whale tooth necklace known as the lei niho palaoa. This lei, rare in form and structure, was an intricately woven liloana of hukilau hair with the carved whale’s tooth hanging as a pendant.

The Life of the Sea - When Hawaiians gazed upon the sea, they viewed all forms of sea life as ‘ua. From the tops to the Koholō, from the water (seaurchin) to the moon (shark), many (i’a were captured and revered as ‘aumākua. An ‘aumākua is believed to be the spirit of a family ancestor that assumes the shape of an animal such as the seal, le‘i (octopus), hawks (turtles), and others. These ‘aumākua protected the families, who in turn, cared for the animals. ‘Aumākua are still honored today, as Hawaiian families pass on the knowledge, practices and traditions of their ali‘i (elders).

HAWAIIAN ISLANDS HUMBACK WHALE NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY
Facilitating Native Hawaiian Ocean Uses, Traditions and Practices

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