

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea
Kumu
Ka ‘Imi Na‘auao O Hawai‘i Nei

Can you please introduce yourself? What is your name?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea
My legal name is Sally Jo Manea. My Hawaiian name is Keahi Manea. My hula people and Hawaiian language friends and colleagues use Keahi. My family, my church people and other people use Sally Jo. So I'm known by both different names, by different people.

How did you get involved with conservation people?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea
Another kumu hula, already active with seabird conservation, Sabra Kauka, was asked by the Kua‘i Forest Bird Recovery Project people to do a blessing. She was not available and referred these people to me. At that time, I was still actively teaching hula and had a group of dancers and musicians, and so they asked us to do the blessing.

When was that?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea
About ten years ago. I think it was 2014. Maybe even longer. We've done annual blessings for their spring research season ever since that first invitation.

How important is it to incorporate the Hawaiian culture into a conservation work, into a science project like this one?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea
There are different answers to that. When we first got involved with KFBRP, they were planning to release about twenty puaiohi that had been raised in captivity on Maui. They wanted to assure their survival as best they could. And so I think the thought was, we need all the help we can get, from all directions. And so a blessing would be helpful in that way. I think that was their feeling. And when they explained what they were doing, we felt the same way. Yes, these little birds that have been raised in captivity need to be able to survive, and so, let's do the best we can, and call on all of the spirits, the ancestors, the ‘aumakua, everything, all the energy that we can call on, all of that to help. So it was a mutual thing. Cali guys were looking at it from a spiritual point of view I think, and so were we. Our training is through Roselle of course, and we knew this is the protocol, these are the prayers, these are the ways you address things, and this is the procedure to acknowledge all of the spirit ancestors, ‘aumakua, gods, whatever you want to call them. So I

had the training, and Roselle's blessing, because she wasn't on Kaua'i, and she enabled me in previous situations to do the protocol. So that was one part of it: Cali and our group were aligned as far as calling on all the energy that we could to make sure these birds would survive in their new environment. So we got acquainted with them and their project. And they got acquainted with us and our training, and it was very satisfactory.

So the other aspect is this, and it took me a while to sort of figure it out. The conservation community, generally, is a group of haole researchers who are very highly educated, and very devoted, and very disciplined, and they go about doing what they're doing with a purpose. And with the local community, there's a disconnect. There aren't very many local people involved in the conservation community, and the conservation community wasn't really involved with the Hawaiian native hula and music community. They were kind of separate. Because Julia and Cali have done such an amazing job of reaching out and stating the purpose of the Forest Bird Recovery Project over the years, now, when I go out among local people, they know. They know what's happening with the 'akikiki.

When I hear you talk, I can't help thinking of the Hawaiian word lōkahi. From my understanding, lōkahi means unity, it's oneness, and I was told that it's also the connection between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Would you say that we are in the presence of lōkahi with this conservation project?

Sally Jo "Keahi" Manea

Lōkahi is moving together, in the same direction, in order to accomplish a common goal, a common outcome. (Little Pause) When you talk to people, some will tell you "I haven't been west of Kalāheo for fifteen years", or "It's been years since I've been in Kōke'e". Not everyone hikes and looks for birds. Some people go hunt pigs, or they're going to hunt goats, or they're going to look for maile, or mokihana, because it's graduation, but not many local people were going up and looking for birds. Many were unaware of the birds. They were unaware of their names and did not know what was happening to them, even though that's their culture. Some of my hula sisters were that way too. We knew the plants because we use the plants for dancing and for protocol, but I guess we kind of felt that the plants, the people, and the birds were separate. (Little Pause) To tell you the truth, it took being close to the Kaua'i Forest Bird Recovery Project staff, and doing these blessings every year, for me, to understand that it's all the same, that we all need each other. The birds need the plants, and the plants need the birds, and it's all interconnected. At an intellectual level, I understood it, because it works that way with all ecosystems, but until you start looking at extinction, like rapid 'Ohi'a death, and realizing that we could actually lose our 'Ohi'a forest, and all the animals and all the birds that depend on it, you know... (Little Pause) I didn't really understand the interdependence of the forest ecosystem until being around these conservation people - and I claim to be a local person! I claim to know a lot about Hawaiian culture and history... (Little Pause) I think there are a lot of "born and raised" Hawaiian local people that didn't get it either. The extinction issue is getting a lot of attention now, and bringing about awareness and raising consciousness, but it might unfortunately be a little too late.

Do you use feathers for hula?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea

It really depends on what you're chanting and dancing about. We sometimes use rooster feathers on our wrists and ankles to draw the eye there. It's a way to enhance the movement. So if you're dancing about a forest where there are birds, or if you're dancing a mele that has a bird verse in it, or if you're doing a blessing for the birds, then it's totally appropriate to wear feathers. So yes, they're used often and held in high esteem, but we're using chicken feathers either from chickens that got hit by cars, like “Oh look, there's a beautiful dead rooster on the road”, and we'd stop, and we'd pluck the shiny neck feathers, or we buy them on the internet from the feather supply stores. We don't go out and kill forest birds.

You wrote a mele, a song, that's often used in blessings for the current conservation effort to save Hawaiian forest birds. What is the name of the mele, and how did that song come about, and what is its message?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea

Yes, I composed the words of a mele called “Na Manu ‘Ehā”. I think we had just completed one of our blessings in Kōke‘e with Cali guys. I was driving down the hill after that, and I asked myself what a good way would be to get the message out about the mosquito control project. Earlier, I had participated in various Zoom meetings involving conservation groups, state officials, cultural practitioners, and hula people, and everyone agreed on the importance of bringing awareness on the four Hawaiian forest birds that were most risk of extinction: the ‘ākohekohe, the kiwikiu, the ‘akeke‘e and the ‘akikiki. There is a song that's been around for decades, and it's one of my favorite Hawaiian songs, and it's pretty easy, and it talks about the four Islands. It names the islands, and the mountain each island is famous for, and the flower that this island is famous for, and so on. Each verse pays attention to one island, and then at the end, it says these are the four islands of the Pacific. So I thought why not just use that song as a framework and plug in the birds, you know, one verse, each bird, for the four birds. So I started looking at the birds, at the habitats they live in in order to save the place name, because they're becoming extinct too. Now, if you understand the words, you understand that you're singing about a green bird that has a really strong beak because his beak splits bark so he can eat insects. Oh, kiwikiu! It's a fun way to spread the message, and the message is multi-pronged: it's Hawaiian language, it's place name preservation, it's information about the birds, and the last verse is cherish the four birds.

How and where is the mele being used right now?

Sally Jo “Keahi” Manea

The whole purpose is to spread the word, to get it out there. Sharon wrote the melody and the whole idea is it's free and available to everyone. Take it and run with it. Do what you want to with it. Make it your own and play with it and have fun with it. If you want to make a dance, make a dance.

A lot of people feel that if these birds go extinct, it's part of the Hawaiian culture that also dies with it. Do you agree with that? How critical is it to save all endemic, native species, whether they are animals or plants?

Sally Jo "Keahi" Manea

Yes, I agree. You know people are kind of surprised when I say we're losing the place names too, but yes, so much is being lost every single day. (Little Pause) Many people in Hawai'i think that papaya is native to the islands, or people think that plumerias are native plants. And it's not just here, it's all over the world. There is so much homogenization, you know, so much Google, and so much Target, and so much Walmart. (Little Pause) I'm very heartened when I read about efforts to save the Navajo language, and now there are kids going to college, and they're going to get their master's degree in Navajo, in Apache or in Hawaiian. People's roots, that diversity is important. That's what makes Hawai'i unique. That's what makes New Zealand unique. But in many cases, unfortunately, it is too late.

It sometimes feels that at the rate we're currently going, the only animals that will survive are mosquitoes, rats and cockroaches. Imagine! A world only inhabited by mosquitoes, rats and cockroaches... So I need to ask you, are you hopeful for the future?

Sally Jo "Keahi" Manea

I'm hopeful but I'm not confident. I'm hopeful because I see kids going to immersion programs, I read about colleges and universities that are starting native programs. There is a revival and there are efforts going on, there are people who recognize that this is important, and doing what they can to keep things alive. But on the other hand, on the in the big picture, well... (Little Pause) You gotta have hope, you can't give up, you got to save what you can, you got to do what you can, until you die, you gotta do what you can.

Some people are starting to lose hope because the bird situation is very dramatic. Instead of asking why people should care, I'm asking why do YOU care? So my last question is: why do you care?

Sally Jo "Keahi" Manea

It's about beauty. They're beautiful, they're unique. There is beauty in diversity. I just came from spending a few days in Volcano where I sat on my friend's lānai and I watched the 'apapane flying around every morning and every evening, congregating on the tops of her 'ohi'a trees, and chirping and spreading their message throughout the forest. It's beauty. I feel connected to it, it's just part of me and I feel part of it. When I go by the shoreline and see a turtle's head pop out, or when a whale jumps out of the water, and you see this amazing huge creature, and they're flying up into the air and making a big splash, it's thrilling. I feel very grateful, fortunate, and I thank God that I've been able to experience living among these amazing creatures. You have to mālama them. You have to take care of them.