

INTRODUCTION

"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

- - Dante Alighieri, poet (1265-1321)

The Hawaiian Islands are the most isolated island chain on earth, a string of jewels over the heart of the Pacific Ocean. More than 2000 miles from any significant landmass, the isolation of the Hawaiian Islands places them at the center of one of the most spectacular biological symphonies in global history.

The islands known as the Hawaiian Islands are actually the eastern-most peaks of an underwater mountain range that stretches for 1200 nautical miles from the Big Island in the east to Kure Atoll in the west. This is the largest mountain range in the world, less than 10% of which peers above the surface of the ocean. The 100 or so older islands and atolls to the west are sometimes called the "Kupuna Islands" or Ancestor Islands.

The Hawaiian archipelago is a vast time capsule stretching back millions of years from east to west. Like an immense conveyor belt, the Pacific plate slides six inches per year over a magma chamber that lies 40 miles deep in the earth. This chamber is called a "hot spot" and as each island is formed it slides over and makes room for the next. All the islands in the Hawaiian chain have arisen from this single hot spot.

Because of our isolation, Hawai'i is most likely the best place in the world to study evolution. Charles Darwin offered a reward for any collector who would gather him plant and animal samples in Hawai'i.

Hawai'i has the highest rate of "endemism" in the world. A species is endemic to the place in which it evolved. 90% of our native Hawaiian plants and 99% of our native Hawaiian land animals evolved here and exist only in Hawai'i.

Historically, 75% of all United States extinctions are native Hawaiian plants and animals. Almost half of the species currently on the U.S. Endangered Species list are native Hawaiian. Half of our native Hawaiian birds are extinct. Half of those left alive are endangered. Thirty percent of the fish in our Hawaiian coral reefs exist nowhere else on earth.

When these species are gone, they are gone forever.

The Hawaiian archipelago is over 70 million years old. Hawai'i became home to one new species every 50,000 years. This time frame gave each new species plenty of time to naturalize and evolve into a multitude of other different species. This unprecedented explosion of biodiversity is called 'adaptive radiation'. The Hawaiian biosphere could well be the crown jewel of biological creation on planet Earth.

It has been said that when the first Polynesians arrived from the Marqueses Islands to Hawai'i, each valley had it's own species of spider and each ridge had it's own species of snail, each descended from a few common ancestors.

We are now introducing new species into Hawai'i at the rate of 20-30 per year. This is 2 million times faster than the natural rate. The impact of humans on Hawai'i nei is systematically destroying our biodiversity. Hawai'i has become the extinction capital of the world. We now have 500,000 feral cats on Maui alone, not to mention hoofed weed-whackers like goats and pigs. We have highly aggressive bees, coqui frogs, stinging ants, 'stinging nettle' caterpillars, and psychopathic seaweeds - all brought here by *Homo*

sapiens. This does not have to happen. We are simply unwilling to make the hard choices that are necessary to protect our home.

The current unprecedented destruction of native Hawaiian ecosystems must be factored into any decision regarding Hawai'i, including the gathering of herbal medicines. Given the rare nature of many Hawaiian plants, I've purposely excluded certain endangered native plants which I consider to be "at risk" for abuse.

There is a Hawai'i that exists beyond the coconut palms, umbrella drinks, and basted pink flesh. It is a place beautiful beyond description. To view a forest only as a "resource" is to never see the forest at all. How many dollars is a Palila (a native Hawaiian bird) worth? What is the value of a ten million year old ecosystem? The question is so transparent that we don't even see what it says about *us*.

**NA WAO AKUA (HAWAIIAN FORESTS), NA'AU (KNOWLEDGE),
A ME NA'AUAO (ILLUMINATED MIND)**



Artwork by Kit Gentry kitgentry.com

*Your gods, your ghosts,
your demons & dreams bear witness
as you pull rich gifts from your darkness*

*May they return...
to hunt you,
to haunt you,
to heal you.*

*This darkness is my gift to you,
an anchor through time in the bones of your ancestors.
This darkness is my gift to you,
a rich compost to take root in.
This darkness is my gift to you,
a place in the earth... an anchor through time.*

The forests in old Hawai'i were known as "Wao Akua" or "Lands of the Gods." The Wao Akua was a place untouched by the hand of man, a place where God could be experienced directly.

The best way to enter and move through the Wao Akua is to draw one's focus or awareness into the "na'au" (the area of the lower abdomen). This area is significant in many traditional medicine practices. It is known as the "dan tien" in traditional Chinese medicine and the "hara" in traditional Japanese medicine.

Na'au means literally "guts," however it also implies "knowledge" or "intuitive mind." From a Hawaiian perspective, viewing the world through our head or thinking mind can mislead us, but our na'au (intuition or gut feeling) will rarely lead us astray.

The word "ao" means "light" or "daylight," as well as "earth" and "world". Thus, when na'au is combined with ao it becomes "na'auao": The Hawaiian word for "spiritual wisdom" or "enlightenment". This is literally: "Illuminated Mind".

Walking in the forest while experiencing the world from the na'au adds remarkable depth to the gathering of medicine. The world is experienced through our skin and organs, not watched like television with our talking heads. The knees are bent, the center of gravity is low, the awareness is brought to the abdomen, and the attention is "focused" on the peripheral vision ("haka hele"). While gathering we feel for signs ("hō'ailona" or "naka") that give us direction in what we are doing. This practice can take years to master but it is well worth the effort. When we gather herbs we must be willing to *listen* to the forest, not just with our ears, but also with our bodies and our intuition. Rather than telling the forest what *it* is, we let the forest tell *us* what it is. We empty our minds and *pay attention*. Our thinking mind takes a back seat as we learn to pray with our bodies. These plants become our teachers.

This "body knowing" is used not only in the Wao Akua, but also while working with patients. When we pay attention with our bodies, our patients become our teachers.

The intellect, like science or technology, is a good servant but a poor master. It is not an end in itself. Like a cup that holds tea, the intellect is a vessel that can "hold" the intuition or spiritual connection. The cup without the tea is dry and unsatisfying. Tea without the cup is unfocused and is not held in a useful manner. When we "study" plants, the intellect is the "driver" and in control. While gathering medicine the intellect should move out of the way and allow the body to direct the process, interrupting only when necessary. This shift in perception is a critical part of gathering plant medicines.

PLANT GATHERING PROTOCOLS: BRINGING THE MEDICINE HOME

If we are to create a world suitable for human habitation, we must bring the sacred back into our medicine and into our lives. Without a genuine connection to the earth, we lose our medicine *and* the roots of our humanity.

While I am imparting one outline of a Hawaiian gathering protocol, it is only a brief description of a subject that can be quite complex. If you are interested in collecting medicines, you should receive further instruction from a teacher or Hulu Kupuna (Treasured Elder).

Experiencing herbs as live beings conveys *information* to us that is missing from our experiences with store-bought bottles of pills. Through our intent, we can become more deeply connected to the source and origins of the medicines we use. This can also help us understand their "energetics," which is the way they interact with their environment and with us. When we herbalists use local plants rather than using store-bought herbs, we are developing a different *relationship* to plants... *and* to the Earth. This relationship is at the heart of most traditional medicines and is missing from most modern medical practices, both Asian and Western.