

Wai Governance & the Hawaiian Ancestral Circular Economy

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Abstract

This paper examines the central role of freshwater (wai) in traditional Hawaiian resource management and governance. It highlights how intimate knowledge of hydrological cycles informed sustainable economic systems modeled on principles of balance, reciprocity, and regeneration. Wai is considered the source of all life in an indigenous Hawaiian worldview. Ancestral water deities like Kaneikawaiola represent its sacred, life-giving properties. Traditional laws used terms like "kanawai" ("belonging to the waters") to encode protections. Scientific observations of evaporation, rainfall, and groundwater recharge patterns were encoded in mythology, poetry, and place names.

The paper describes how water cycles were conceptually linked to political economy. For instance, the harvest festival Makahiki synchronized governance rituals with wet season abundance. The Kalaiaina land redistribution process upon a ruler's death was designed to mimic water's natural movements across landscapes. Notions of wealth (waiwai) were defined by sustainable access to freshwater. And the interconnected watershed-based land division system (ahupuaa) balanced localized autonomy with resource sharing between mountain and sea.

A central argument of this work is that these water-informed cyclical models formed the basis of an Ancestral Circular Economy (ACE) optimized for equity, diversity, and resilience. In contrast to contemporary systems prioritizing growth and accumulation, the ACE renewed environmental balance and community wellbeing with each generation. It distributed surplus through give-and-take relationships between land, chiefs, and commoners. Hydrologically-aligned boundaries and institutions encouraged place-based agency while maintaining abundance across larger regions. Revitalizing elements of the ACE offers models for sustainable development today, as Hawai'i and the world urgently seek to heal damaged ecosystems and societies. Centering Indigenous water knowledge promotes justice while guiding more ethical and regenerative modes of production. Respecting water's sanctity creates space for alternative economic visions redefining wealth, power, and our collective fate.

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