

Making Waves in Waikiki: Hawaii's Surfing Heritage

The Hawaiians are credited with being the fathers of surfing, and are known to have practiced the sport as early as the 15th century AD. The Hawaiian name for surfing "He'enalu" - can be translated as wave sliding. During its early history, surfing was taken as a sacred practice and only those with a high social status could take part; in other words - Hawaiian kings and queens were surfers. Ironically, today, surfing is seen by the general population as a sport for those who have dropped out of society, the very opposite to how it began.

As a people living on a cluster of small islands in a very big sea, the Hawaiians were not surprisingly fascinated by the ocean, and attached great meaning to its moods and forms. In a similar way to which the Inuit are said to have many names for snow, the Hawaiians also have hundreds of words to describe the various forms of the ever changing sea.

Just as modern day surf bums insist on surfing as a lifestyle rather than just a sport and thus devote great portions of time and money to the pursuit of the waves, Hawaiians also found unfathomable bonds with the practise, as the writings of Kepelino Keauokalani, a 19th Century Hawaiian Scholar, shows in his observations of the local Hawaiian surfers:

"All thought of work is at the end, only that of sport is left. The wife may go hungry, the children, the whole family, but the head of the house does not care. He is all for sport, that is his food. All day there is nothing but surfing. Many go out surfing as early as four in the morning: men, women, children."

Such was the desire of the ancient Hawaiians for wave sliding that if the distant storms didn't generate sufficient waves to ride, surfers would enlist the help of a "kahuna" - a priest who would pray to the gods and ask for surf to come to Hawaiian shores.

However, surfing was to move into a period of decline following the arrival of Christian Missionaries who believed surfing was a hedonist act and a waste of time. They adamantly preach against surfing's existence, and by the late 1800s, the sport had almost been completely exterminated. Had it not been for a few hardcore surfers who continued to practise the sports and Hawaiian kings such as David Kalakau, surfing may have died out all together.

However, the gradual decline of the missionaries influence allowed surfing to breathe again, and by the start of the 1900s, surfing had not only regained its former popularity in Hawaii, but was beginning to spread to other beaches of the world.

By the late 1920s, tourists from all over the world were booking into newly built [hotels in Waikiki](#) in their hundreds, all eager to experience the world's most famous beach and see the exotic "surf people" for themselves. Another 30 years on, and waves of American surf migrants began to arrive from California in search of the renowned Hawaiian waves, that had reached legendary status in surf circles.

Now, surfing is a billion dollar industry, practiced across the world from Iceland to Indonesia - but let's not forget those pioneering Hawaiian kings and queens without which, the sport of surfing may never have been invented.

About the Author

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