HAWAIIAN STAR COMPASS

Traditional Polynesian navigators depended on all of the natural elements in order to navigate. They used the stars and when those were obscured they used other indicators such as the waves, the wind, the birds, dolphins and other sea life. That created a close tie between the people and nature and reinforced their trust in Io, the Creator. Traditional Navigators today must develop that same close connection to nature. The Hawaiian star compass, developed by Master Navigator Nainoa Thompson, is not a physical compass, but a mental construct that helps the navigator memorize the rising and setting positions of stars, flight paths of birds, directions of the waves and other signs in nature needed to find their way. In the center of the Hawaiian star compass is Manu (Bird) with his beak, tail and outstretched wing-tips pointing midway between the four cardinal directions.

WA‘A

The wa‘a is the Hawaiian word for the traditional carved canoe with the distinctive outrigger (spars attached to a shaped log or float parallel to the hull) that helped stabilize the canoe. The single-hull version served as the workhorse for Native Hawaiians and their Polynesian ancestors and was used for recreation, fishing and short trips around the island. Larger double-hulled wa‘a were used throughout Polynesia for the long voyages across the Pacific using traditional non-instrument navigation methods. The design of these ancient double-hulled wa‘a served as a blueprint for the modern day voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a and the many others that followed her.

ALAKA‘I

The alaka‘i are the guides that help lead the way on the voyage. Manō (shark), leads the wa‘a through the open ocean. Manu (the birds) serve as offshore guides, directing and alerting that land is near within miles. The nai‘a (dolphins) and honu (turtle) alert the navigator that land is near.

E‘ALA

E‘ala, a replica of an ancient Polynesian voyaging canoe, was built in 1980 at Poka‘i Bay by the Wa‘ianae Hawaiian Civic Club and Na Kahuna Kala‘i Wa‘a. The project revived the art of canoe building on the Wa‘ianae coast and inspired the people of Wa‘ianae to restore Ku‘ilioloa Heiau, an ancient navigational heiau located at Poka‘i Bay. E‘ala was used to teach traditional navigation and for a maritime curriculum program developed for local schools that reinforced the concept of unity between the land and the sea. In 2010, Kaina Nakanealoha and Sam Kapoi brought E‘ala back to Wa‘ianae from Sand Island where it had been sitting in dry dock. In 2014, the largest wa‘a halau was built at Wa‘ianae Boat Harbor to provide a sheltered location to restore E‘ala. The large A-frame five-story structure is open to the north and south and serves as a star compass for teaching navigation and traditional canoe building to haumāna (students) and as a beacon for the community.

HŌKÛLE‘A

Hōkūle‘a was the first double-hulled traditional sailing canoe built in Hawai‘i in more than 600 years. Her maiden voyage around the Hawaiian Islands in 1975 was a powerful symbol of pride and dignity for Native Hawaiians. Her initial goal was to prove that ancient Polynesians made purposeful trips throughout the Pacific using only traditional non-instrument navigation skills. Constructed from detailed drawings by Native Hawaiian artist-historian Herb Kawainui Kāne, her goal was propelled by the visionary founders of the Polynesian Voyaging Society; Herb Kāne, Ben Finney and Tommy Holmes. In 1976 her 2,500 mile voyage from Hawai‘i to Tahiti guided by the legendary skills of the traditional Micronesian navigator, Mau Piailug, demonstrated that ancient Polynesians were the greatest explorers on earth, navigating 10 million square miles of open ocean as they settled the Hawaiian islands and others they discovered along the way. More voyages followed as a new generation of traditional Hawaiian navigators trained by “Papa Mau” retraced the ancient ocean routes of their ancestors. In May 2014, she set sail with her sister ship, Hikianalia, on a three-year worldwide voyage that would inspire and unite cultures around the world to mālama honua (care for our island earth).
To learn more about the Polynesian Voyaging Society, Hōkūleʻa, its Mālama Honua Worldwide Voyage and information about the skills and knowledge required to navigate using only the stars and other clues in nature, visit www.hokulea.com.
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