

Nov 04, 2016 by [Molly Krasnodebska](#)

# Tourism and Hawaiian Culture: Curse and Opportunities <sup>[1]</sup>

Currently, I am working for the Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association (NaHHA), a non-profit organization that promotes a greater presence of Hawaiian culture in the tourism industry. NaHHA works “to connect the Hawaiian community and the tourism industry” through “consulting and educating, developing and implementing effective communication tools.” As a contractor of the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority (HTA), NaHHA is the lead agency for State of Hawaii’s initiative to promote Hawaiian culture in tourism.

NaHHA’s work is based on communication between the Hawaiian community as the host culture and the tourism industry and tourists as a “foreign audience”, and is therefore closely related to public diplomacy. Its mission is based on the premise that tourism, if managed appropriately, can benefit the Hawaiian community and help preserve Hawaiian culture. In line with NaHHA’s understanding, I am defining “Hawaiian” inclusively, describing anyone who calls Hawai‘i his or her home and identifies with Native Hawaiian traditions, culture and values.

Although some of the mass hotels and other tourist corporations have been increasingly supportive of cultural initiatives in recent years, the industry’s priority is economic profit, which historically has led to a commercialization of Hawaiian cultural elements for entertainment purposes. This has created great resentment among the Hawaiian community and a negative perception of everything “touristy”. Given the circumstances, one might ask if the vision of a culturally conscious tourism industry is even realistic.

## Hawaii’s Disconnect

In the 1950s, tourism emerged as Hawai‘i’s biggest industry, and has been growing ever since, expecting over 10 million air seats and nearly \$15 billion in visitor expenditures this year, according to HTA reports. Last year, “each guest spent an average of \$2,103 during their stay, which equates to \$220 per person in state tax revenue.” The industry is also one of the top job providers in the state. Needless to say, with Hawai‘i so dependent on tourism, the industry holds great influence within the state.

Selling the “Hawaiian ambiance” has been part of the industry’s strategy to attract visitors since its beginnings. But whereas in the early years the hospitality industry was to a large extent locally run, with the emergence of mass tourism foreign and U.S. corporations took control over what was catered to tourists. As long as profits were made, it mattered little that dances performed at the evening cocktail show were Tahitian, not Hawaiian, or that flowers for lei given out at the airport were shipped in from Thailand. Mass tourism commercialized and trivialized elements of Hawaiian culture and created a culture specifically for the

entertainment of tourists.

One may argue that every place trivializes its culture to a certain extent as part of tourism branding. What made the issue more severe in Hawai'i, however, was that prior to the rise of tourism, Hawaiian culture was undergoing a crisis of its own. After the Hawaiian Kingdom's loss of sovereignty to the United States in 1898 and the massive de-population of Hawaiians as a result of foreign diseases, Hawaiian culture and language began to suffer a decline that reached its low in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, as Hawaiian culture was struggling for survival, the more and more powerful tourism industry was creating its own image of "Hawaiian culture" and catering it to international visitors.

It is therefore not surprising that during the Hawaiian Renaissance – a wave of cultural revival and resistance led by academics and cultural leaders inspired by the counter-cultural and decolonization movement of the 60s and 70s—tourism was thrown in one basket with evils like colonialism and cultural imperialism. The movement entailed a deliberate separation of the "authentically Hawaiian" from all that was perceived as "foreign" and "colonial". It was successful in restoring both the culture and sense of cultural pride among the Hawaiian people. Today, Hawaiian culture is alive and well: Hawaiian language is being taught in schools and universities, cultural practitioners have restored many of the ancient practices, such as traditional farming, music, and dance; countless academic disciplines have undergone a paradigm shift towards a more "islander-oriented" perspective; cultural events and festivals take place on a regular basis across the island chain.

But the dichotomy between "local" or "Hawaiian" vs. "touristy" has for the most part remained. Despite this growth of a powerful Hawaiian cultural sphere, foreign visitors have comparably little exposure to it. Mai Tais on the beach and grass hula skirts are Hawai'i's international brand like they were fifty years ago. From the tourist industry's perspective, this image sells well. And many in the Hawaiian community rather leave the tourists where they are, on the "island" of Waikīkī, the hotel district of Honolulu: physically and metaphorically isolated from the rest of the island population.

### **Tourism and Branding and PD**


Given this situation, the creation of a healthier relationship between Hawaiian culture and community, and the tourism industry and tourists is a challenging task. Most countries or states conduct tourism branding to attract visitors and increase economic activity. Culture and heritage are often catered to tourists as unique elements of the place that contribute to its competitiveness on the tourist market. Usually, though, tourism branding is just one of many campaigns, next to other branding and public diplomacy programs a country or place conducts, which all reinforce one another.


However, Hawai'i's international image has been almost entirely dominated by its tourist brand. While it is a very "attractive" brand, in the sense that it pulls visitors from across the world and generates money, it is disconnected from the Hawaiian people's cultural identity and heritage. Instead, the brand is controlled by the hotel giants, and exists primarily *for* the tourists.

One may be tempted to suggest that Hawai'i needs rebranding. However, Hawai'i's tourist problem is not reducible to *image* but can only be managed if the strong gap between the

community and the industry is bridged.

When Dr. George Kanahale, one of the Hawai'i Renaissance leaders, founded NaHHA in 1997, with the innovative vision of achieving greater Hawaiian involvement in tourism and thus reviving "Hawaiianess" in the industry, many considered his idea controversial. In recent years, however, a culturally sustainable form of tourism -- in particular one that pays attention to indigenous cultures -- has been emerging as a global trend.

A UNESCO study on "[Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development](#)"  defines cultural heritage as not only material sites but also "intangible expressions such as language and oral traditions, social practices, rituals, festive and performance events." According to the study, tourism has the potential to help preserve cultural heritage. Firstly, the revenues it generates can be used towards cultural preservation. Secondly, being "centered on the fundamental principles of exchange between peoples [tourism] is both an expression and experience of culture" and therefore "has an important role to play in facilitating dialogue among culture." A greater dialogue between Hawaiians and foreign visitors that gives visitors exposure to Hawaiian culture can serve as a public diplomacy tool to spread a more authentic image of Hawai'i outwards. For this the involvement of communities and development of "policies and attitudes resulting from an understanding of the complex relations between tourism and culture" on both the side of the host culture and the tourism industry is essential.

To describe a potential future of a more culturally sustainable form of tourism in Hawai'i, from a public diplomacy perspective, I lay out three of [Nicholas Cull's five elements of public diplomacy](#)  as crucial for Hawai'i.

*Listening:* Making tourism more beneficial to the sustaining of Hawaiian culture has to begin with greater willingness of the Hawaiian community to engage with the industry and with tourists. For instance, there must be better understanding of the different interest groups among tourists. For certain groups, such as those who are interested in cultural and heritage tourism, ignorance regarding Hawaiian culture and history often results from lack of access to knowledge of or adequate resources to locate "authentic" information.

*Cultural diplomacy:* More Hawaiians started to recognize that sharing their culture with tourists does not have to "put the culture on sale". Cultural diplomacy as opposed to cultural entertainment can have positive effects, creating a more authentic and sophisticated image of Hawai'i among foreign audiences, as long as the content and the message remain in the hands of Hawaiian cultural practitioners and artists.

*Exchange:* A positive example of exchange is [Ka Welina](#), a network of Hawaiian communities who manage tourist visits to cultural and historical sites in their neighborhoods. The network "provides these communities with a dynamic way to invite visitors and engage in authentic host-visitor experiences". This project not only gives the communities control over the site as well the message communicated to the visitors, but also creates direct people-to-people interaction and unmediated intercultural dialogue.

Bridging the divide between host culture and the tourist industry, which has been created over many decades, is not a task that can be easily or quickly accomplished. The economic power of the industry makes it resistant to change, and the Hawaiian cultural sphere, while in much better shape than fifty years ago is still fragile. But tourism offers opportunities for cultural exchange that can benefit Hawai'i and contribute to cultural preservation if they are

recognized and strategically utilized.

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