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How will South Maui mālama its wahi kūpuna?

South Maui's wahi kūpuna face pressures from climate change, sea level rise and the growing numbers of residents and visitors. Wahi kūpuna refers to a physical site, area or landscape that are significant for Native Hawaiians. The term broadly encompasses where past generations repeatedly interacted with the environment (taro patches, fishponds, trails, shrines, etc.) or places that they purposefully chose to designate as nonuse (mountain summits). These places shape the identity and inform and inspire Native Hawaiian values, traditions and practices.

South Maui's coastlines were once lined with vibrant fishponds and supported fishing practices such as shore casting, spearfishing, mussel and shellfish picking, and deep-sea fishing passed down through the family lines of Native Hawaiians living in the Plan area. Other traditional coastline resources such as burials and heiau are endangered by development, sea level rise and climate change hazards.

Growth in the tourism industry, including the number of visitors and related development, has led to overcrowding at beach parks and sensitive coastal areas affecting resources and residents' quality of life. Impacts to mauka forests and regional urbanization have led to problems from stormwater runoff like flooding, erosion, and degraded coastal water quality and coral reef health. Development within the region's floodplains and the loss of wetlands has disrupted their natural functions of flood and erosion control, resulting in increased impacts from floods. Exposure to wildfires has increased due to developments located near fallow agricultural fields covered by invasive grass. Collectively, these pressures place the community and its wahi kūpuna at risk.

How can South Maui manage a watershed that is not its own?

Despite having very little local rainfall, the Kīhei area suffers from yearly stormwater runoff that floods roads, damages buildings and threatens the health of the ocean and coral reefs with severe brownwater events. Local development policies such as building over the wetlands and covering the lowlands with concrete and other impervious surfaces are a significant factor in South Maui's vulnerability to stormwater. However, the political division of the island into districts masks the interdependence of lowland areas with those above them. Hawaiian land management before colonization was based on the ahupua'a system, where water flow from mauka was carefully handled to support agriculture and fish ponds while protecting makai settlements and the ocean. To fully address stormwater runoff and flooding in South Maui, it will be necessary to once again look mauka beyond its own boundaries.