

Navigating the Pacific Way: A Conversation with Governor John D. Waihe'e III

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This month, the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center is officially relaunching the long-anticipated renewal of the Pacific Islands Report. In addition to weekly news headlines from around the Pacific, PIR will now also feature original essays, articles, and commentary published on a quarterly basis.

To commemorate this inaugural issue of the quarterly *Visions and Voices* publication, I interviewed former Governor John D. Waihe'e III, the first Native Hawaiian to become governor of Hawai'i or any US state, and a member of the East-West Center Board of Governors. From the 1970s to the present, Gov. Waihe'e has been instrumental in connecting Hawai'i with leaders of the Pacific, motivated by his heritage, experience, and passion.

"The Pacific Islands are very important to Hawai'i because we are a part of it," Waihe'e said. "More than that, though, is that we in Hawai'i are a bridge for many of our Pacific Islands cousins in so many ways—not just geographically, but also economically and educationally."

Pacific Roots and Connections

Born and raised in the small sugar-plantation town of Honoka'a on Hawai'i

Island, Waihe'e recounts growing up surrounded by the unique blend of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific cultures found in Hawai'i. "I grew up in a Hawaiian home," he says, "and so much of what we call culture now was something that I took for granted, because it was all around me. Growing up in Hawai'i, I appreciated not only my Hawaiian culture, but everybody else's."

His awakening to a broader Pacific identity began after he left for college at Andrews University in Michigan. He describes the experience as one of the most "fortunate moments for me. Not only did it expose me to the rest of America, but it also made me appreciate Hawai'i."

After returning home to earn a law degree from the University of Hawai'i's Richardson School of Law in 1976, he entered politics and was a delegate at the state's landmark 1978 Constitutional Convention, at which many of Hawai'i's statutes and programs for Native Hawaiians were established. "I was very fortunate to come home and be part of Hawai'i during this renaissance," Waihe'e said. "The seventies were the beginnings of getting to know what Hawai'i was and appreciating my culture, because my generation was the generation in Hawai'i where you were not taught our language. We

grew up with parents who were trained or believed that maybe they should not teach us Hawaiian language or culture. Getting back to re-appreciating and re-learning was very exciting.”

At the same time, he notes, “many of our Pacific Islands cousins, particularly those that were associated with the United States, were going through their own rediscovery of their identity and regaining their political status. That was one of the most interesting things for me, and it was happening across the whole Pacific.”

Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders: A Catalyst for Change

By the time Waihe‘e became governor in 1986, many Pacific Island states were regaining independence after decades, and in some cases centuries, of colonial and territorial rule, and were once again being led by Pacific Islanders themselves. “This was a very, very exciting time, because what we discovered was that we all needed each other,” he said. In 1971, Fijian statesman Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara helped organize what became the Pacific Islands Forum. Then in 1980, the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders and the Pacific Islands Development Program were established at the East-West Center by Ratu Mara and then-Hawai‘i Governor George Ariyoshi, with whom Waihe‘e later served as Lieutenant Governor.

“Knowing the ‘George Washingtons’ of these emerging countries after their independence was monumental,” said Waihe‘e. “To be able to associate with giants like Ratu Mara from Fiji, Sir Geoffrey Henry from the Cook

Islands, and many more was tremendously exciting.”

Through the University of Hawai‘i and the East-West Center, Hawai‘i had been privileged to have educated many of these foundational leaders, he noted. Indeed, since 1960, no fewer than 13 Pacific heads of state have been East-West Center alumni.

What made the Pacific Island Conference of leaders unique, Waihe‘e said, was that it included Pacific territories and states like Hawai‘i, Guam, American Sāmoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands along with sovereign island nations. Working together in this way, he said, has enabled Pacific leaders to address shared issues that impact all Pacific Islands such as transportation, economic development, education, natural resources, and, of course, climate change.

Lessons on the Pacific Way

In 1997, after decades of working toward unity in the Pacific Islands, Ratu Mara published his memoir *The Pacific Way*, a term he had coined to describe a collective cultural and political identity spanning across Pacific Island states. Waihe‘e said that his close relationship with Mara included deep discussions about the future of the Pacific, including conversations on the golf course when the elder statesman would visit Hawai‘i.

“The Pacific Way is an understanding that the oceans are not dividers, that they’re actually highways,” Waihe‘e said. “In many respects, understanding that is foundational to understanding what I believe we need to know in today’s world: that the planet itself is finite. If you don’t learn anything else on an island, you learn that if you don’t take care

of what you have, it disappears. And sometimes that's not as obvious on a continent."

But on islands, "things are finite, so you need to learn to depend on nature. You learn to depend on your neighbors. And the ocean is not the barrier, it is how you travel to your next neighbor, how you communicate, how you get things done. The Pacific Way is an expression of living in those kinds of circumstances."

He referred back to the great precontact Hawaiian high chief 'Umi-a-Līloa, who according to royal genealogies and oral lore ruled Hawai'i Island around 1500. "Umi was one of the great heroes of Hawaiian antiquity," Waihe'e said. "He was considered the epitome of what a leader should be because when he was growing up, he would find people in need in the kingdom, and he would go home and take all the food that they had in the household and feed the people in the community who needed it the most."

"So if you are going to be a leader, you should ask yourself, "what would 'Umi do?" He would feed the people! On an island, the ideal of a good chief is one who eats after everybody else. Leadership in the islands is built on that principle. You hold your status because you do what is good for the people. That's the Pacific Way."