

# Lava Tubes, Caves, and the Protection of Associated Cultural Resources

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## *Summary Statement and Discussion Framework for the Cultural Resources Commission*

**Framing note:** This item is intended to support a broader countywide discussion about guidance, consultation, cultural protocols, and protection pathways for lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural resources. Hale Ki'i cave is included as a case study and reference point, not as the center of the agenda item.

## Proposed Agenda Item Language

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**Discussion and possible action regarding lava tubes, caves, and the protection of associated cultural resources, including the possible establishment of a Permitted Interaction Group.**

## Summary Statement

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Lava tubes and caves are important cultural, ecological, geological, and historical spaces that may contain burials, cultural deposits, paleoecological remains, stratified sediments, subfossils, and other irreplaceable records of Hawai'i's past. Because many of these spaces are hidden below the surface, they may be inadvertently exposed during grading, construction, infrastructure work, or other land-disturbing activities.

Recent discoveries, including the Hale Ki'i Cave case, provide an important opportunity to consider how Hawai'i County can better recognize, document, and protect lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural resources when they are encountered. Hale Ki'i is not presented here as the sole focus of the discussion, but as a timely case study that illustrates broader questions about hidden cultural resources, cultural protocols, lineal descendant consultation, scientific documentation, landowner responsibilities, and long-term stewardship.

This agenda item invites the Cultural Resources Commission to consider whether general guidance, policy statements, or a Permitted Interaction Group could help support the Planning Department, landowners, developers, cultural practitioners, lineal descendants, scientists, the State Historic Preservation Division, and stewardship organizations when lava tubes or caves are identified. The goal is to develop a thoughtful countywide approach that improves awareness, strengthens early consultation, and helps ensure that irreplaceable cultural and ecological resources are not disturbed, damaged, or lost before appropriate guidance is in place.

## Purpose of Discussion

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The purpose of this discussion is to consider how the Cultural Resources Commission can provide general guidance to support the protection of lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural resources in Hawai'i County. This may include developing policy statements, recommending early consultation practices, clarifying appropriate cultural protocols, and identifying ways to better inform landowners, developers, and agencies about hidden cultural resources that may be encountered during development or land-disturbing activities.

## Hale Ki'i as a Case Study to Consider

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The Hale Ki'i case illustrates the kinds of questions that can arise when lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural or paleoecological resources are encountered during development. It provides a useful reference

point for considering how existing review, permitting, consultation, and stewardship processes function when hidden subsurface resources are identified.

As a case study, Hale Ki'i also raises a broader policy question for Hawai'i County: how should pre-human and paleoecological remains be understood when lineal descendants and Hawaiian communities recognize them through genealogy, pilina, and kuleana? These resources may be treated primarily as scientific or paleontological materials, even though they may also be understood as cultural treasures and part of a living genealogy of place.

The goal is not to adjudicate the details of a single site, but to learn from the issues it brings forward so that future discoveries can be handled with clearer expectations, earlier consultation, appropriate cultural protocols, and stronger protection pathways.

## Questions for Commission Discussion

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1. What general guidance should Hawai'i County provide when lava tubes or caves are encountered during development or land disturbance?
2. Who should be consulted when caves or lava tubes are discovered, including lineal descendants, cultural practitioners, SHPD, scientists, landowners, and community stewardship organizations?
3. What cultural protocols should guide access, documentation, interpretation, and care of lava tubes, caves, and associated materials?
4. How can the Planning Department better inform developers and landowners about the possibility of hidden cultural resources?
5. Should the Cultural Resources Commission establish a Permitted Interaction Group to develop recommendations, policy language, or guidance materials?

## Possible Commission Action

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The Commission may consider establishing a Permitted Interaction Group to develop recommendations, guidance, or policy statements regarding lava tubes, caves, and the protection of associated cultural resources in Hawai'i County. Potential recommendations may address early awareness, consultation, cultural protocols, documentation, stewardship, and coordination with the Planning Department, SHPD, landowners, lineal descendants, cultural practitioners, scientists, and community organizations.

## Potential Charge for a Permitted Interaction Group

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- Identify general principles for protecting lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural resources when encountered during development or land disturbance.
- Recommend early-notification and consultation practices involving appropriate cultural, community, scientific, landowner, county, and state partners.
- Develop draft policy guidance or advisory language to support the Planning Department in communicating with developers and landowners.
- Clarify recommended cultural protocols for access, documentation, handling, interpretation, and care.
- Report back to the Cultural Resources Commission with findings and recommended next steps.

## Reference Statement from Hale Ki'i 'Ohana

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**Purpose of this reference statement:** The following statement is included to help illustrate the cultural, genealogical, and stewardship dimensions that may arise when lava tubes, caves, and associated cultural or paleoecological resources are encountered. It is included for reference and context, while the agenda item remains focused on broader countywide guidance and policy considerations.

## **Aloha Ho‘omau o nā Mamo o Hale Ki‘i**

### *The Enduring Love of the Descendants of Hale Ki‘i*

On the ‘āina of Hale Ki‘i in Kona, a doorway opened between the ancient world and the living one. Deep within a cave — a chamber of Pō — the remains of a 5,000-year-old flightless nēnē were found resting in the quiet embrace of sediment. Around it lay the tiny shells, seeds, snails, and creatures that lived beside it in that distant age, preserved like a verse of the Kumulipo written in soil instead of chant.

To the world of science, this is a rare discovery.

To Lineal Descendant Mokuohai Kahunanui Nui of Hale Ki‘i, this is a returning ancestor.

For in the teachings of the Kumulipo, life begins long before the arrival of Kānaka. The smallest beings, the swimmers, the crawlers, the flyers all emerge in the unfolding of Pō, each one a relative in the long genealogy of creation. The ancient nēnē is not outside our story. It is part of the same lineage that eventually births the gods, the chiefs, and the people.

So when this kupuna nēnē resurfaced, the descendant did not see a fossil. They saw a family member who held this ‘āina long before our footsteps arrived. They saw a sibling from the earliest chapters of creation, a being who lived in the time when the world was still young, when the land was shaping itself, when the first breaths of life were still settling into their forms. And now, after 5,000 years, this elder has returned to meet its youngest siblings — the living nēnē who still walk the ahupua‘a of Hale Ki‘i today.

This is the miracle of this place: the nēnē of then and the nēnē of now stand on the same ‘āina, under the same sky, in the same genealogy. The oldest and the youngest have finally come together — a reunion between the first siblings and the siblings of today.

To the descendant, this is a moment of profound pilina, a reconnection across millennia. It is a reminder that our relationships do not begin with human arrival. They begin in Pō, in the deep darkness where all life is born. The cave where the kupuna nēnē rested is not merely a geological feature. It is a portal to the ancestral realm, a place where life returns to its source and emerges again when the time is right.

And the time is right now.

The presence of modern nēnē on the same land is not coincidence. It is continuity. It is the living proof that the lineage has survived, adapted, and endured. It is a sign that the kuleana of this ‘āina — and the kuleana of those who descend from it — is still alive.

As Lineal Descendant Mokuohai Kahunanui Nui of Hale Ki‘i says: “This kupuna has come home. It has returned so that we, the children of today, may remember the children of Pō. The nēnē of now are its mo‘opuna, and we are descendants of the same creation. This discovery is not a story of the past — it is a reminder of our kuleana to protect the life that still walks this ‘āina.”

In this way, the discovery becomes more than science. It becomes genealogy. It becomes spirituality. It becomes a reunion — a reunion between the first siblings and the siblings of today.

And through this reunion, the ‘āina of Hale Ki‘i breathes again, carrying forward the memory of all who have lived upon it, from the smallest shell to the flightless nēnē to the descendants who now stand as its guardians.

*From Hale Ki‘i ‘Ohana — March 2026*

## **Reference Note: Broader Policy Questions Raised by the Case Study**

The Hale Ki‘i case brings this cultural responsibility into direct focus. Exposed during construction, the cave contains an exceptional record of Hawai‘i’s ecological past prior to human arrival — a deep-time archive of

life, landscape, and genealogy that includes stratified sediments, subfossil bird remains such as Giant Nēnē Nui (*Branta rhuax*), land snails, charcoal, ash, coprolites, seeds, and other preserved materials. These resources are not simply scientific specimens; they are part of a living cultural landscape and an irreplaceable archive of ecological memory.

The case also highlights a broader issue for Hawai'i County: some cultural resources do not fit neatly within existing preservation categories. Pre-human cave deposits and paleoecological remains may be treated primarily as scientific or paleontological materials, even when lineal descendants and Hawaiian communities understand them through genealogy, pilina, and kuleana. This creates both a gap and an opportunity for an overdue discussion about pre-human and paleoecological remains as cultural treasures, not simply scientific materials.

Hawai'i's Cave Protection Act, HRS Chapter 6D, provides important protections for cave resources, but those protections may be limited when a cave is discovered on privately owned land during active development. In that setting, HRS §6D-2 does not create a clear, independent preservation pathway; long-term protection may depend largely on landowner consent, existing environmental review, or permit conditions. Hale Ki'i therefore offers a timely case study for broader countywide discussion about how discoveries should be addressed before future resources are placed at risk.