

# ***Found! Lost Hippie Tribe of Hawaii***

***November/December 2005***

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## HEARTLAND HEALING MAGAZINE

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**Heartland Healing Magazine** is

published bi-monthly by Heartland Healing in partnership with the Reader newspaper.

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# Sacred Destinations: The Lost Tribe of Kalalau Valley

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## *In Search of Sustainable Living*



by Brad Olsen

**W**e all have bad days. Everyone has those days when nothing seems to go right. Really bad days can make people depressed or counterproductive, but not me. On my bad days I try to remember some truly fantastic exotic location that at one time elevated my spirits. A mental postcard snapshot of paradise usually does the trick. You know, a tropical beach with waterfalls cascading down a jungle cliff face surrounded by interesting and beautiful people? But sometimes the weight of all that is wrong with the world rears its ugly head and a picture of paradise doesn't work. That's when I try to envision a perfect society that doesn't pollute, barter for everything, and lives harmoniously in a paradisiacal environment. Is that possible to visualize? I hope so, because here is where the story begins...

### **got sustainability?**

In this disposable modern age society of ours it is difficult to find a truly sustainable community anymore. Some would argue that they are extinct as the dodo bird, but I'd beg to differ. Although one would have to venture deep into the Amazon basin or New Guinea highlands to find the last remaining untouched people

who live completely off the land, some Stone Age societies still exist in very isolated pockets. It is sad to think that just a few centuries ago almost everyone on the planet lived a sustainable existence where virtually no pollution or non-biodegradable waste was produced. Today the trash dumps of the world have become mountainous eyesores and the cities are choking on atmospheric pollution.

Despite the changing face of the world I found a sustainable community in perhaps the most unlikely place of all – right here in the United States on the Hawaiian island of Kaua'i.

Years ago I had heard of a "lost tribe" living in the secluded Kalalau Valley on the rainy side of Kaua'i. As with all extended trips I undertake, I began by thoroughly researching my destination. I learned that native Hawaiians had densely populated the Kalalau Valley in prehistory. Ever since the first Hawaiians made their way to Kaua'i from the Marquesas more than 1500 years ago in their double-hulled canoes they lived sustainably in the fertile Kalalau Valley. It was only in 1919 that the isolated canyon was finally abandoned.

Since Kalalau is the largest valley on the windward Na Pali





coast (*Na Pali* meaning “the cliffs” in Hawaiian), it was prized by the native people for its fertile soil and abundant fresh water. Two sacred *heiau* ritual platforms flank the valley on either side of the Kalalau stream near the beach. Here the gods were consulted, justice meted, and babies brought into the living realm. The entire valley is recognized as a sacred place on the island of Kaua‘i.

In the early days, seafaring Hawaiians used dugout canoes to travel around Kaua‘i and to a neighboring island called Ni‘ihau. Regular trade around Kaua‘i, especially to the isolated canyons along the Na Pali coast, was commonplace. Like days of old, today’s solo adventurers ply the Na Pali water route in kayaks during the summer months. Dinner cruises and commercial adventure trips also navigate the scenic shoreline. Similar to the villagers of lore, modern campers can set up their tents on old Hawaiian agricultural terraces.

Wild plantation crops including coffee, guava, mango, bananas, tobacco, oranges, taro, lemons, limes, eggplant and squash continue to grow in the lush Kalalau Valley. Locals told me there were community gardens with radish, lettuce, basil, rosemary; all sorts of vegetables and of course marijuana.

Feral goats and freshwater prawns are routinely captured and eaten. Wild pigs are available in the next valley. With such abundance it seemed logical that a sustainable community could exist in Kalalau. Now my partner and I just had to endure the arduous hike to find it.

### Hawaii’s Premier Hike

The difficulty of getting into Kalalau Valley is its salvation, keeping it blissfully isolated from the outside world. The only land route in and out is a demanding eleven-mile scenic trail. There are many side paths to waterfalls and jungle-covered farming ter-

aces along the way, so no need to rush. Plus the views of the Na Pali cliffs along the way are nothing short of breathtaking. This ancient footpath transitions a dozen times from dense jungle valley to precipitous ledges hanging over sheer cliffs dropping straight down to the pounding surf below. This hike is not for the faint of heart. Any Hawaii guidebook will call the Kalalau Trail one of the finest hikes in all the islands. It is certainly one of the most strenuous.

Due to the valley’s isolation, a few dozen permanent residents are able to lead a mostly sustainable lifestyle even though it is illegal to do so. Helicopters transporting Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLR) agents can arrive unsuspected and issue tickets to any squatters they encounter. Agents in Zodiac rafts and kayaks navigate the ocean route to Kalalau Valley, but only in the summer months when the north shore swell subsides.

Whichever way the agents synchronize their raids – by air, sea or land – the scowling citizens of Kalalau detect their tormentors several critical minutes ahead and scurry to protective hiding places. According to a Hanalei local I interviewed, the raids are reminiscent of a scene from the movie *Planet of the Apes*. When the oppressive DLR agents move in (the Apes I presume) the jungle people warn each other with yelps before they scatter and hide. They entrench themselves so deeply into the foliage that rarely are any captured. “Like animals,” noted the Hanalei local.

The main casualty of the DLR raids thus far has been the tribe’s 400-book library, airlifted out and destroyed. Word is the replacement collection is already up to 100 books. As much as the DLR has tried to clear the valley of illegal campers – and they have been trying for 30 years – it is virtually impossible to evict all the permanent residents. Thus, one of the most unique sustainable communities in the

TOP LEFT: The amazing Na-Pali coastline.

TOP: Our shower.

BOTTOM: Kalalau trail

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



Destination close, footprints found!



Welcome to life under a cliff.

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Western world continues to exist in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean.

### Life in Lost Valley

We knew we were getting close when the boot tracks on the main trail changed to barefoot prints. My hiking partner and I had just endured 15 miles of a grueling trek over two days on the Kalalau Trail and we could think of nothing more pleasant than dropping our heavy packs and getting out of the drenching rain. Hikers we met on the trail told us that we'd most likely find the permanent inhabitants living near the beach. It wasn't long after our arrival on Kalalau Beach that we made contact with the friendly natives. My partner was the first to spot the telltale campfire smoke rising near a cliff overhang in the jungle. When we approached the encampment all heads turned in suspicious scrutiny. Our smiles despite the inclement weather must have put them at ease because they soon welcomed us with an offer to join in a locally produced meal just off the fire. We accepted.

Over a delicious dinner of goat stew and macaroni we came to be friends with the permanent residents. We learned where the communal gardens were hidden, along with emergency stashes of "outside" food just in case we had to hide from a DLR raid. They told us the best place to bathe was the waterfall at the end of Kalalau Beach.

One young woman cradled a baby goat found abandoned near the cliff encampment. Seems one of the permitted campers had petted it and the mother goat rejected her baby because of the human scent. It would have surely died if the girl hadn't adopted it and started feeding it soy milk.

"Looks like it will make a nice pet someday," I commented. "Try dinner in six months," retorted a scruffy, self-proclaimed pirate who let his guard down after we produced a bottle of rum to share. He smiled a crooked smile and shared a homegrown doobie in return.

As night fell and our buzz kicked in, the pirate

told us the tale of Koolau the Leper who successfully escaped modern society into Kalalau Valley over a century ago. As I let myself get lost in his story the specter of a sudden DNR raid significantly enhanced the insurgent feeling of the moment.

### Legend of the leper

Koolau was a *paniolo* (cowboy) from Waimea living a normal life with his family when disease struck. He was diagnosed with leprosy in 1889 and duly exiled for the rest of his life to the island of Molokai. Instead of permanent estrangement from his family in a savage leper colony, Koolau decided to hide. He picked Kalalau Valley as his new home, together with his wife and son, high up in a hidden cave accessible only by a knife-edge ridge. Other renegade lepers were living there before Koolau arrived, but his audacious escape just before deportation brought notoriety to the valley.

In June, 1893 Sheriff Louis Stolz was dispatched to capture Kalalau's most famous fugitive, but Koolau shot him dead before he could get close. A posse of bounty hunters descended on the valley and rounded up all the fugitive lepers – all except Koolau and his family. Koolau killed two more men as they were inching their way towards his cave. The search was called off and no one ever claimed the \$1,000 reward offered for his arrest.

The pirate's eyes sparkled as he told this part of the story. Koolau died a free man, succumbing to leprosy in 1896, along with his infected son. His wife Pi'ilani emerged from Kalalau shortly after to tell the world that both Koolau and her son had died.

A few years later author Jack London glamorized the whole affair with his famous short story called *Koolau the Leper*. London's flamboyant retelling of a real-life escape from oppression in the "flower-throated gorge" put Kalalau Valley on the map.

As the rain came down in the jungle around us and the glow from the campfire flickered on the cliff overhang I thought for a fleeting moment that this was the paradisiacal society I'd always dreamed of in my darkest moments. Then water started getting into

my sleeping bag in the middle of the night and I changed my mind.

### Beyond Babylon

Spending a few days with the lost tribe of hippies in Kalalau Valley was enlightening, if not downright fun. Most of the men and women were in their twenties or thirties, decidedly nudists, and all seemed to have some reason for leaving society and calling this place home. One or two had a criminal warrant they were evading, but most of the hippies expressed a simple desire to escape "Babylon" and all the trappings of the modern world. In the valley there was no rent to pay, nothing to buy, no media and no oppression except the occasional DLR raid. In this lawless society everything was bartered or given freely. It was a refreshing look at how primitive societies once functioned, and in this case still do. Unfortunately for my partner and me Babylon called – we both had flights to catch in a few days.

After leaving Kalalau I recalled the reassuring lesson that indeed the best things in life are often the simplest. Living sustainably is a goal we should all try to achieve – at least in part. It's not too difficult to reduce our garbage load, recycle, compost, or even grow a portion of our own food. In my opinion even the smallest effort is a big step in the right direction. After all, the planet is rapidly being consumed by a parasite known as the human race. Practicing sustainability, even in Babylon, can lessen our impact and very likely aid in leaving a renewable planet for future generations. Is that too much to ask of anyone? Even on a bad day?

*When planning a trip to Kaua'i, please call Hanalei Vacations at: 1-800-487-9833 or email: rentals@aloha.net. Hanalei Vacations offers rental properties on the North Shore, an ideal base before staging a trek into Kalalau Valley.*

*Brad Olsen's sixth travel book, Sacred Places Around the World: 108 Destinations was released last year as a second edition. His books are available on Amazon.com or his website BradOlsen.com.*