Hana Hou!

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For the Love of Hula
In class with Leilani and Puanani Alama

Road Warriors
Bicyclists put their mettle to the pedal in Hawai‘i

Big Fish, Little Boat
The thrills and chills of kayak fishing
WHO NEEDS A BIGGER BOAT?

Two-hundred-pound ‘ahi vs. fourteen-foot piece of plastic: the thrill of kayak fishing
The squalls are stalled near the horizon a few miles to our starboard. Now and then a band of rain breaks off, runs ashore and crosses the patchwork of lava fields and forest belts on the Big Island’s upper Puna coast. With the rain comes a chill breeze, visible as a dark patch of turbulence rippling across the glassy sea. It blows past and then the calm returns.

The rain is not worrisome, just typical early fall weather for the windward side. Behind us, along Keaukaha and across Hilo Bay, the summit of Mauna Kea is clouded in, but Hilo town glows in intermittent sunlight. A southerly swell is running, perhaps six feet high from trough to crest, but we are about a half-mile offshore. At these depths there is little chance the waves will break. Just a rolling rise and fall, enough that, with fifty yards separating us, we disappear from each other’s view as each swell passes between our two kayaks.
Shawn has three poles on board. The one mounted directly behind him is for 'ōpelu, or mackerel scad, a favored baitfish for deep-water anglers. Two other poles jut from either side of the kayak at forty-five-degree angles, each trolling a five-inch-long Daiwa “crank bait” — double-hooked lures meant for mid-size pelagic fish: Things like aku and ‘ahi, ono and mahi-mahi, which can weigh as little as five pounds or more than two hundred. Challenging prey, especially if you're trying to land them while sitting only a few inches off the water in a fourteen-foot boat that doesn’t weigh a whole lot more than the fish themselves.

I, on the other hand, have only one pole — all the better, because I’m no fisherman. The only reason I’m here is because Shawn Zenor is an old friend of mine, and he’s agreed to introduce me to the world of kayak fishing. I’ve already lost two ono this morning. And the only reason I suspect they were ono is because Shawn had told me that they hit hard and take off running. A few months back, just as he was about to land a decent-size ‘ahi, Shawn saw a flash of silver shoot up from the deep blue: ono. It swallowed the ‘ahi whole and then snapped through the line with its strange jaw, which clamps like a pair of serrated scissors. “That was my lucky lure, too,” Shawn says without a hint of the dramatic. This stuff just happens; you deal with it.

At least my line is intact, though my lure isn’t looking so lucky — the hooks are bent, the body scarred with tooth-marks.

There are no accurate numbers as to how many people in Hawai‘i are fishing from kayaks these days, but it’s generally agreed that the sport is on the rise. Most attribute this to a variety of factors: It’s among the least expensive ways to reach offshore fishing grounds; it’s rooted in an older, simpler way of doing things and satisfies a certain self-reliance gene present in most of its practitioners; and it’s just plain challenging.

Still, among Island anglers kayak fishermen are a minority. The most recent data from the US Fish and Wildlife service dates from 2006, when there were about 114,000 Hawai‘i residents who participated in one form or another of recreational fishing. Add another 65,000 fishing visitors, and you have an industry worth more than $110,000,000. By contrast, aquahunters.com, the best-known online forum among Hawai‘i’s kayak fishing community, currently logs a few more than a thousand registered members, not all of whom live in the Islands.

This disparity, if accurate, isn’t surprising. For all the allure of kayak fishing, there is also the reality: Sitting in a self-propelled, unshaded plastic boat for eight-plus hours isn’t for the faint of heart (or ‘ökole). For those who are prone to motion sickness, doing the simplest thing — say, tying a lure — is dizzying when you are, being rocked by even the smallest of swells. Watching someone try to stand on dry land after a day on the water is like watching toddlers taking their first steps. And your knees, I can tell you from experience, get really, really sunburned.

Then there’s the open ocean. Many prime fishing spots in the Hawaiian Islands are not buffered by barrier reefs that would otherwise separate calm inner from wild outer waters. Paddle for twenty minutes and you’re in a completely different environment. Even when they’re not breaking, big open ocean swells are challenging, as are the currents invisible to the untrained eye. Also occasionally challenging are the large predators that shy away from coastal areas but do patrol the offshore deep.

You have to deal with all of this before you can even think about what it means to land a deep-water fish from a kayak. A longtime fisherman once told me that ‘ahi fight so hard that they can literally cook their own flesh. Ono can swim up to fifty miles per hour and have razor-sharp appendages. Landing these fish in the best of circumstances is never as simple as reeling them in and scooping them out of the water with a net. The standard seated position in a kayak is awkward for most things other than paddling; now imagine.

The young man and the sea: Going after big pelagic fish from a tiny kayak miles from shore is risky, but for Isaac Brumaghim, seen here fishing off O‘ahu’s Wai‘anae coast, it holds a purity that connects him to his native culture. “When I realized how much we canoe-fished in ancient times,” he says, “I felt like I was digging back into my roots, and that felt really special to me.”
a desperate fish circling around or under a boat that's rocking and shifting with each run on the line. Once you’ve worked the fish to the surface, you have to maneuver it within range of a sharp gaff, which is wielded with one hand while holding the fishing rod with the other. Once you land it, there’s no stepping aside if it thrashes in your boat.

All of this requires more than a casual level of interest, but those who last seem hooked for life. Take for instance Isaac Brumaghim. Thirty-seven years old, originally from the Big Island but now residing on O‘ahu, Isaac was an avid canoe paddler when he found his calling nine years ago. “Canoe racing was a part of my Hawaiian culture, and I really took pride in that,” he says. “I tried shoreline fishing, but it was so boring and so tough to catch anything. So I tried fishing off a one-man outrigger, but those canoes are expensive and fragile and there’s not really enough room. But I think that’s why my passion grew so quickly: When I realized how much we canoe-fished in ancient times, I felt like I was digging back into my roots, and that felt really special to me.”

**Kayak fishing** may seem a far cry from Hawaiian tradition, but not necessarily, at least not in broad outline. Writing in the 1880s, Emma Beckley (then curator of the Hawaiian National Museum) noted that Hawaiian fishermen “often went fishing so far out from land as to be entirely out of sight of the low lands and mountain slopes.” Hawaiian historian Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau, also writing in the late nineteenth century, noted that Hawaiians went after more than a dozen deep-water fish, including aku (skipjack), kāhala (amberjack), ‘ula’ula (red snapper), ‘ahi (yellowfin tuna) and uku (gray snapper), among others. Abraham Fornander, a contemporary of Kamakau, describes more than twenty types of canoe fishing techniques used for catching everything from he’e (octopus) to ‘ahi, which Fornander describes as “a very ferocious and powerful fish.”

That’s about where the similarities end; virtually nothing about a modern kayak resembles a Hawaiian fishing canoe. Most fishermen typically get their start by retrofitting standard, molded-plastic ocean kayaks for fishing: bolting on a couple of rod holders for trolling and bungee-cordings a plastic milk crate (pronounced “tackle box”) into the aft hold. Beyond these basic modifications, it’s open season: There are battery-powered sonar units, more rod holders, camera mounts—go ahead and YouTube “kayak fishing Hawaii” sometime—even sails and outriggers. And while a kayak is far less expensive than a fishing boat, it’s not necessarily cheap.

“Even if you start with a used kayak, you’re looking at a minimum of about $600 to rig it for basic fishing with one or two poles,” says Shawn. “If you want to achieve some level of safety and improve your chances—GPS, marine VHF radio, sonar and so forth—it’s more like $1,500 for a fully outfitted ‘yak. And you can easily double these numbers if you buy a new kayak that is designed for fishing.”

While Hawai‘i has a fairly substantial industry producing streamlined racing kayaks and modern one-man outrigger canoes, no one in the Islands is making kayaks that are pre-modified for fishing. Instead the most popular brands in Hawai‘i—Hobie and Ocean Kayak—are the worldwide giants, both of which have had a well-established place in the Islands for years. Shawn is among a cadre of local fishermen who receive industry sponsorship, but Jackson Kayak (his sponsor) hasn’t yet cracked the Hawai‘i market—too risky for local dealers to import a shipping container full of kayaks without knowing whether they’ll sell.

**As part** of the push to build the sport, Isaac founded Aquahunters in 2005. The site’s online forum has grown into a tight-knit community where members share stories, impart information and deliver the occasional smackdown to those who unwittingly violate Hawai‘i fishing etiquette. You don’t, for instance, want to go online, identify a specific fishing ground by name and then gush about how good the ‘ahi are biting. This is common sense, but it also has roots in long-standing Hawaiian tradition: One doesn’t fish another’s area without permission. “The community has become so strong, and we’ve been able

"You’re definitely at the mercy of the fish when you’re on a kayak," says Andy Cho, pictured here fishing off South Kona. Cho is legendary for landing some of the biggest catches from a kayak in the Islands. He regularly cleans up in competition, leading some of his peers to call him the “Kelly Slater of kayak fishing."
to push it forward together,” says Isaac. “Like anything, we require that people show respect, but that’s the way Hawai‘i is: You give respect and you’ll get respect, too. That’s just how we operate.”

In 2008 Aquahunters sponsored its first Makahiki tournament, which has developed into an eight-month-long statewide fishing competition in which participants operate on the honor system, claiming the fish they catch up to forty days within the cycle. More recently, Isaac has been offering eco- and kayak-fishing tours to educate potential new converts rather than leave them to learn it all on their own.

Today, Aquahunters is the closest thing to an official body in terms of tracking catches. The website’s “trophy room” includes two world records: Devin Hallingstad’s 176.5-pound ‘ahi and Andy Cho’s 225.5-pound blue marlin. Other fish, though not world records, are equally impressive: Devin has also caught a 102-pound ulua, while Andy Cho’s brother Steve landed a 132.5-pound black marlin. These large-scale catches have elevated Hawai‘i from relative unknown to one of the world’s premier kayak fishing arenas. Andy in particular has achieved a somewhat mythical status; Isaac calls him “the Kelly Slater of kayak fishing,” in reference to professional surfing’s multi-time world champion. With good reason: Andy dominates the Aquahunters pro division, having won every Makahiki tournament since its inception, and this is now much more than a hobby for him. Fishing four to five times per week, usually off the South Kona coast, he makes his living selling his catch.

“I didn’t start kayak fishing to do it commercially,” Andy says now, recalling how he’d first paddled out to keep Steve company. “But the years went by, and I started getting better and better, and when I started selling fish it got pretty lucrative. I was making more money than going to work, so I just started fishing full time.” By targeting mainly ‘ahi and ono, which sell at market for $4 to $5 per pound, he can make anywhere from $300 to $500 a day. Of course, sometimes other fish get on the line. That blue marlin, for instance, which took him longer than two hours to land and during which time he and his kayak were pulled across roughly two miles of open water. “You’re definitely at the mercy of the fish when you’re on a kayak,” says Andy when asked about the difference between kayaks and other boats. “If the fish is pulling against a boat, it’s basically working against a fixed object. But when you’re on a kayak and they go on a good run, you’re going with them. Once I clocked myself using my GPS, and I was being dragged seven or eight miles per hour across the water.”

Even as Hawai‘i has gained in worldwide recognition, the local community remains close. Each winter, Makahiki competitors gather from throughout the Islands for a post-competition awards banquet. Without fail, the top guys all show up with food to share ... fish, of course. “We’re supposed to be there to celebrate the pros,” says Isaac, “but this is just the way it is here. We’re here as a whole to show the world that we rank among the best.”

Meanwhile the sport continues to evolve, leading one to wonder: Just how big a fish can one catch from a kayak? “As the sport has progressed we’ve been pursuing bigger and stronger fish, like marlin,” says Isaac in answer. “Recently I hooked up to one that was somewhere in the range of three hundred pounds. I lost it, but just seeing it launch out of the water and realizing how much power and danger there was in this one fish, it made me check myself, like, ‘Wow, am I ready for this?’”

Isaac clearly doesn’t lack confidence when it comes to being on the water, but at the same time what he’s talking about is a common theme among the fishermen I’ve met along the way ... and, really, among most of Hawai‘i’s more extreme watermen and women: You need to be trained and prepared to deal with situations for which you can neither train nor prepare.

“You don’t have the security blanket a boat would give you when you run into big problems in the ocean, but you just have to know what to expect out there: Fish are big and fish are dangerous; there are sharks involved, there are whales involved. There are days out there when it might not have anything to do with a fish; the conditions are what might worry me, where I ask myself, ‘Can you handle? Can you get in through these waves?’ Can you
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get back through this current and these winds?’ There are all kinds of things out there that remind you that this is a dangerous sport.”

Shawn knows about the danger. After a couple of hours of trolling back and forth through a fifty-yard patch of water that looks slightly glassier than its surroundings—a nutrient-rich upwelling where pelagics tend to congregate—we take a break, drifting near enough to talk as the deep ocean swells pass beneath us. I lean forward and try not to capsize while fumbling with the hatch between my feet, looking for something to drink. Meanwhile Shawn recalls a day last whale season. He was out at this same spot and realized that the hull of his kayak was acting like an amplifier for the humpbacks’ eerie song. He couldn’t see them anywhere, only hear them. So he pulled out his cellphone and started recording. And then there they were. “At the height of the season, when whales are breaching all around you,” he says, “it can be like dodging bombs.”

But that’s nothing compared with what happened in the summer of 2011, when a shark came up behind, chomped the back third of his kayak and lifted it out of the water. Shawn’s usually fairly reserved when it comes to talking about himself. But this is how he recounted the event on his blog, Drifting Son: “[It] almost knocked me out on impact and then again while he pushed me around. I let out a man-scream and whaled on it with my paddle, and he let go before I got to my gaff. He was way longer than my kayak (a 14.5-foot Akuaterra), and his head was easily three feet wide. Big gray head is all I could really see to ID it—either a tiger or great white, and I’m leaning towards the latter. … I was so scared I sprinted to the shallows and just sat for a while to calm down. kayak has tooth-marks, my nerves were shot, and I came home with no fish, but at least I came home.”

I ask whether this experience made him think twice about going out to sea. “I truly have not been more scared in my life,” he says, “but I think I’m able to accept the humility of not being the apex predator out there. I got over it that day by paddling back out there after the shaking stopped and continuing to fish without incident. I figure it’s a once-in-a-lifetime event, and I survived mine. I’ve since caught and released tiger sharks and hammerheads up to eight feet long, so I’ve become somewhat acclimated to their presence, but
there is really no way to prepare yourself for a twenty-foot tiger shark clamped onto the back of your boat. So why bother?"

That all happened a mile or so farther out to sea from where Shawn took me fishing, and it was on my mind when the squalls finally found us that day—nothing too heavy, but enough to limit visibility to maybe fifty feet. At just about the moment when the rain began to obscure Shawn from my view, he hooked into another one. I heard him swear, then laugh: The handle had snapped off his reel and dropped into the depths. I squinted into the rain, watching as he tried to hand-line the fish.

Only when it was far too late did I realize that I had somehow clipped the pick-up on my own reel, which was allowing my line to spool out, creating a spaghetti-like mass on the surface of the water. It was too much of a tangle to reel in, so I just hauled the whole ugly nest into the boat, at which point one of the hooks on my lure embedded itself in the crotch of my surf shorts, dangerously close to making its first bona fide catch of the day. How quickly things could go wrong. Not that we were in any real danger, but ... in other circumstances this could get real. And quick.

A few days after our fishing trip, having returned to O‘ahu with my back still aching and my knees beginning to peel, I emailed Shawn to ask what keeps him returning to sea. Lately he’s picked up a commercial fishing license and a few equipment sponsors, but this is still largely a labor of love for him, and a fickle one at that.

“I suppose,” he replied, “that the kind of person drawn to kayak fishing is one who seeks a more participatory experience. One not content to sit on shore waiting for something to swim by or to just passively troll all day on a powerful boat with reels so big they’re more like winches. But despite all the clever sayings like ‘a bad day fishing is better than a good day working’ and ‘it’s called fishing, not catching,’ there have definitely been days when I wished I had just gone to work. When it's cold, windy and raining and it doesn’t let up, it’s simply no fun. Those are days of humility and a reminder that we are merely bit players in the game. But even at those times, before I fall asleep that night, I’m already thinking about making the next trip better. Every trip is a learning experience, and in your head the next one will always be better.”