dropped in the ocean, beyond the breaking waves. We would then swim to shore, and pass all of our tents, sleeping bags, cameras, food and water to the island, hand to hand, while standing in the surf. At least the men from the islands of Papua New Guinea and Borneo, and Caleen Sisk—chief of the Winnemem Wintu, who are salmon people—were good swimmers. Molu Kulu Galgallo, an elder from a desert region in Kenya, had never been in the water before. For Danil’s colleagues from Central Asia, it was the first time they’d even seen an ocean.

On our second day on Maui, there had to be swimming lessons and a water safety test. It was pretty clear that the Hawaiians were concerned about the Central Asian shamans. “Swim?” asked the mountain men, “Why would we swim? Our rivers are glacial meltwater raging down toward the sea!”

I wonder what the shark saw. Fifty legs swirling in the sands, it must have looked like a tribal water dance. Could she hear all that laughter?

Twenty-five sacred site guardians were gathering on Maui for ceremony before heading to IUCN’s World Conservation Congress in Honolulu in early September. Altaian nature park founder and spiritual leader Danil Mamyev requested this pre-meeting. Danil has told me several times as we travelled to conference centers for international meetings, “If we can link the guardians, we link the sacred places and strengthen the energetic network. Through ceremony, the caretakers, the cultures and the sacred sites all grow stronger.” Our Native Hawaiian friends from the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana were eager to help. Everyone agreed that before launching the dialogue and politics we needed to ask permission, and then bless—and hopefully be blessed—by a sacred place.

In just two days time we would take a boat to uninhabited Kaho'olawe to be
Native Hawaiian hosts gathered around. “I have never seen a shark here, ” said one. “I saw it from the cliff. It was a hammer-
head, ” said another, gesturing a wide snout. “It was white, ” said a third. Luana said, “I’ve been coming to this beach for swim tests for
35 years and I’ve never seen a shark here. ” We lingered on the beach a while lon-
ger. I finally said, “I guess we’d better head back, ” and just as I lifted my foot and
started to turn, there in a breaking wave, making one last pass, swam the white-
finned manifestation of the ocean god, a stunning form of Kanaloa. “It’s a she, ” said Luana. “I can feel it. Friendly. Very gentle. ”

“Ho’ailona?” I asked. A sign from
nature? “Big time, ” said Luana.

The following day, we journeyed halfway
up Haleakala volcano to a rain shrine that
faces Kaho’olawe. Luana led a beautiful cer-
emony as each guardian offered water from
their homeland, pouring a stream onto a
rock altar, and of course it rained!

At dawn the next day, we crossed seven
miles of ocean to find small waves welcom-
ing our delegation and everyone joyously
swam to shore. We visited sacred sites,
learned how the value of aloha ʻaina—love for the land—led to stopping the U.S. Navy’s test bombing on the island, and the guardians wrote an indigenous declaration to be offered at the World Conservation Congress.

Craig Neff conducted an ʻawa ceremony, as we shared the favorite drink of the gods in golden sunset light looking north toward Haleakalā. It was a ceremony of gratitude and commitment, as each person expressed thanks and spoke aloud his or her vision for the path ahead. Under the stars, Kamil went into trance and sang some of the Manas epic of Kyrgyzstan, Molu Kulu and Ali Gufu Ibrae danced around the fire and sang songs of Kenyan nomads, and Danil initiated a shaman’s drum given to him by the Mongolians.

We carried strong energy to the meeting of the global conservation community in Honolulu. At one session, Native Hawaiians chanted, told stories and celebrated “Forty Years of Aloha ʻAina.” Caleen shared a memorable press conference with the legendary Jane Goodall. The guardians spoke at film screenings and panel discussions. They reworked and issued a powerful declaration that may have contributed to IUCN’s decision to recognize a new category for indigenous organizations, ensuring them membership and a vote at future Congresses. After many meetings and intensive lobbying, the membership passed Motion 26, linking sacred natural sites to official protected areas and World Heritage Sites as “No Go areas” for mining and extractive industries. This IUCN resolution can now be used as a policy mechanism by governments, indigenous peoples and advocacy groups around the world.

After many years, the indigenous rights movement is hitting its stride. At Kahoʻolawe, Mauna Kea, Standing Rock and Shasta Dam, native people stand with each other and their allies—not in protest, but in prayer.

Returning home to California, I awoke one morning thinking about the shark. In a half-conscious state I was back in the ocean, feeling the group of people we had assembled—the life force, the energy, the love for land and water. It struck me: the guardians had called that shark. She felt them, and was checking us out—Nature’s response to a ceremony of gratitude. Hoʻailona.