

HEARING
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
BILL 575 - A BILL TO AMEND THE NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES ACT
MAY 15, 2003

Written Testimony of William Y. Brown, President & CEO
Bishop Museum

Honorable Chair Nighthorse Campbell, Vice-Chair Inouye, Members of the Committee, my name is Bill Brown and I am the President and CEO of Bishop Museum located in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Accompanying me today is the Museum's Director of Program Planning & Development, Jennifer Chock.

I would like to begin by thanking Senator Inouye and Senator Akaka for sponsoring this bill that will assist Native Peoples to preserve and revitalize their languages. I also extend our thanks to Senator Campbell for holding a hearing on this matter. The Bishop Museum appreciates the opportunity to testify today and strongly supports the passage and full funding of Senate Bill 575, *A Bill to Amend the Native American Languages Act to provide support of Native American Language Survival Schools, and for Other Purposes.*

Bishop Museum Background

Bishop Museum is a research and educational institution that focuses on the cultural and natural history of Hawai'i and the Pacific. Charles Reed Bishop founded the Museum in 1889 as a memorial to his late wife, Hawaiian Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop. Although private, Hawai'i legislation designates the Museum as the State of Hawai'i Museum of Natural and Cultural History. Our mission is to provide world leadership in understanding, conserving, and telling the stories of the cultures and natural environments of Hawai'i and the Pacific, and to serve Hawai'i residents with programs that expand educational experiences. One of our primary purposes has been to serve and represent the interests of Native Hawaiians by preserving their artifacts, documents, and other materials, and by offering educational programs that perpetuate their cultural vitality. Over the last 114 years, the Museum's centerpiece has been the preservation and continued life of the Native Hawaiian culture.

Today, the Museum's cultural collection has expanded to more than 2.4 million items, 60% of which represent the Native Hawaiian culture. The Hawaiian Collection includes over 1 million cultural objects and archaeological specimens, more than 125,000 historical publications – many in the Hawaiian language, plus 1 million historical photographs, films, works of art, audio recordings, and manuscripts in

Hawaiian. Our recent collaborative programs with the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Peabody Essex Museum, the Iñupiat Heritage Center, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and Native Hawaiian organizations such as the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement have resulted in more research and therefore much greater exposure of Native Hawaiian culture and language nationwide. We are grateful to Senator Inouye for his support of these collaborative programs.

Rebirth of the Hawaiian Language

As with many other Native Peoples, governmental policies of western assimilation repressed the use of the Hawaiian language and discouraged the practice of Hawaiian culture. Children were punished for speaking Hawaiian in the classroom and Hawaiian families were encouraged to downplay their ancestry by adopting western names and customs.

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, Hawai'i experienced a great resurgence of interest in all things Hawaiian. This Hawaiian cultural renaissance helped to revive the study and practice of Hawaiian culture, art, and language that has continued to the present. In the area of Hawaiian language, public and private schools began offering Hawaiian language classes, and in 1978 Hawai'i declared Hawaiian as one of the two official languages of the State. Probably the most influential change occurred with the creation of language immersion schools.

In 1983 a grassroots organization called 'Aha Pūnana Leo was formed. This group of visionaries created a Hawaiian language immersion program where all classes were taught in Hawaiian. Today the State's Department of Education offers Hawaiian language immersion programs in the public school system. Before these programs, most Native speakers were over the age of 70 and some would argue that Hawaiian was a dying language. Twenty years after the start of Hawaiian language immersion schools, the number of fluent Native speakers from pre-school to graduate school continues to increase in leaps and bounds.

The importance of having a vibrant Hawaiian language is summed up in an ancient Hawaiian proverb: I ka 'ōlelo nō ke ola, i ka 'ōlelo nō ka make. Translated into English, it means "In the language there is life, in the language there is death." By recapturing the Hawaiian language, we are recapturing Hawaiian culture.

By all accounts, we in Hawai'i have been incredibly fortunate in reversing the damage caused by assimilationist attitudes that threatened to extinguish Hawaiian culture. The Hawaiian immersion schools have created a new generation of fluent bilingual Hawaiian speakers who are comfortable conversing in both English and Hawaiian. The people of Hawai'i, both Native and non-Native, have embraced a vibrant and living Hawaiian culture as evidenced by listeners of Hawaiian music, people attending hālau hula (schools), and those adopting traditional Hawaiian values.

Today both the federal government and the State of Hawai'i support the perpetuation of the Hawaiian language.

Despite all of these blessings, preserving and perpetuating a Native language remains a constant challenge.

Bishop Museum's Hawaiian Language Resources

The Museum's Hawaiian cultural collection contains a vast array of Hawaiian language materials poised to enhance the ongoing revival of the Hawaiian language. Our collection includes 125,000 pages of Hawaiian language newspapers, as well as out-of-print books, handwritten letters, stories, chants, legends, genealogies, research notes, and unpublished manuscripts – all in Hawaiian – that date back to the 1800s and early 1900s. We possess over a million photographs from this time period, many with captions written in Hawaiian. Early documentation of Hawaiian artifacts in our collections is written in Hawaiian. The Museum also has over 1,200 audio tape recordings from the 1950s, '60s and early '70s of Hawaiian elders speaking in their Native tongue, recounting history, events, chants, legends, and personal stories. These language resources undoubtedly contain invaluable insights about Hawai'i's history as well as information that will deepen our understanding of Hawaiian culture, and most especially Hawaiian language. All of these incredible materials are a precious resource, a direct link to the Hawai'i of Old.

Bishop Museum has the awesome responsibility to care for and preserve these precious, one-of-a-kind treasures, and make them as widely accessible as possible. Many of these materials are over a century old, and protecting these resources from degradation has unfortunately meant restricting access. However, with ever advancing technology, we now have the ability to meet the challenge of preserving Native language treasures while simultaneously enhancing access to this information.

Depending on the object or item, providing access may cover the spectrum from scanning a document to full-fledged research. For example, handwritten correspondence between two Hawaiian chiefs could be scanned so that it would be digitally preserved in its original form. Its text could be digitized and added to a searchable database. The contents could be translated into English so that non-Native speakers could access the information. The document might require interpretation so that the message is placed into the appropriate context, both historically and culturally.

Bishop Museum also hopes to republish out-of-print Hawaiian volumes, as well as to publish – electronically and on paper – manuscripts and research notes written in Hawaiian but never before translated. As for the oral history tapes of Hawaiian elders, Bishop Museum envisions digitally preserving these voices from our past and eventually transcribing and translating their words. Future products would include

CDs of these early recordings that would be available through libraries, bookstores, and internet-accessible databases.

At its most basic level, Bishop Museum hopes to share these vast language resources and make them relevant to our users today and in the future, for people in Hawai'i and the throughout world.

Another challenge – one probably common to all Native Peoples – is the concern that linguistic oppression may have resulted in the irretrievable loss of the language. In Hawai'i, such a loss was noted in the introductory remarks of an 1865 Hawaiian-English dictionary. The editor commented that Hawaiian language speaking styles varied to suit a situation, and he observed that the practice of this speaking style was dying off:

Besides the language of every day life, there was a style appropriate to oratory, and another to religion and poetry. This latter is known to but a few natives of the present generation, and is fast disappearing.

[Andrews, Lorrin. 1865. *A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language*, p. xvi (Honolulu: Henry M. Whitney)]

Today, despite the Museum's vast Hawaiian language collection, and despite the emergence of a new generation of Hawaiian speakers, we are discovering that we too have not fully recaptured all aspects and nuances of the Hawaiian language. Bishop Museum's project to digitize its Hawaiian language newspapers has uncovered words that are not defined in any Hawaiian language dictionary. Sometimes these words can be understood based on the context. Other times project staff need to do additional research. Oftentimes we consult with Hawaiian elders who may remember a time when their grandparents used such words. Hopefully, this collaboration between linguistic practitioners, historical scholars, and Hawaiian-speaking elders will assist in preventing the further erosion of the Hawaiian language and result in a comprehensive understanding of regional and contextual styles, vocabulary, and grammar.

Bishop Museum recognizes that the strongest link to the past is through these elders who grew up hearing and speaking Hawaiian. They are an invaluable language resource that will enhance the translation and understanding of the Museum's Hawaiian language materials. This challenge is one of time and is common to us all. As Native-speaking elders pass into the next world, so too passes their knowledge. It is imperative, then, to tap these living treasures as quickly as possible to stem any further loss of Native languages.

In closing, Bishop Museum wishes to thank the Committee for recognizing the importance of reviving, preserving, and perpetuating Native languages. By recapturing Native language, we recapture Native culture. This legislation empowers Native Peoples for whom language builds a bridge of understanding that connects the wisdom of the past, the experiences of the present, and the hopes of the future.