

## Hawaii's Economic System before Western Contact: Subsistence

After their long voyages from south Pacific islands ended, the Hawaiians found themselves separated from the rest of world by hundreds of miles in every direction. They had to rely on the plants and animals that they brought with them and the land and sea for materials they needed to survive.

The early Hawaiians developed a **subsistence economy** based upon the ahupua'a, a division of land that extended from the mountains to the sea. The ahupua'a was self-sufficient community in which people found or grew whatever they needed to feed, clothe, house themselves, and to meet any other religious or ceremonial traditions and, of course, to provide for their chiefs.

They grew their own food in rich, fertile valleys using streams to help them grow taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugar cane, breadfruit, and coconuts. They harvested the ocean for fish and shellfish. They raised animals such as dogs, pigs, and chickens to add to their diet - all within their own ahupua'a.

Hawaiians produced only what they needed, any extra or surplus that a farmer or fisherman produced would be shared with others, and in return, the others shared what they had. They did not grow or make anything to sell – there were no markets or stores. When a family living near the shore visited their relatives and friends in the valley they shared their fish or crops with them. They, in return, would receive what they needed without asking. This was the basis of the subsistence economy.

Producing extra food and sharing it allowed the Hawaiians the time to learn the skills to become experts in specific tasks. Some people became experts in growing crops, others in fishing techniques. There were also experts in building shelter, making canoes, caring for fishponds, and irrigation systems to water crops.

The people believed in working together as a community. Community projects were usually shared. One example is the hukilau, when family and friends got together to fish with a large net. They divided the catch among all the people who helped.

Finally, the people produced extra to provide for the daily needs of the chiefs. In return for this support, the ali'i were expected to take care of the people, making sure that there was enough food and supplies for everyone, and to conduct ceremonies that pleased the gods.

Until the arrival of the Westerners, the Hawaiians lived in this subsistence economy for hundreds of years, producing and sharing only what the needed to feed, clothe and house themselves, meet religious obligations, and to provide for their chiefs.

