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Bishop Museum Hosts Marine Invasive Species Learning Exchange

More than 50 participants representing more than 20 global resource management organizations gathered to combat the spread of invasive species threatening coral reefs.

Honolulu, Hawai‘i — [Bishop Museum](#), the State of Hawai‘i Museum of Natural and Cultural History, in partnership with the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, hosted the first-ever Marine Invasive Species Learning Exchange on its campus. On Wednesday and Thursday, Aug. 20 and 21, 2025, more than 50 participants representing more than 20 conservation organizations from across the Pacific and Atlantic gathered to learn from each other, and address the spread of invasive species threatening coral reefs and nearshore ecosystems in the United States and its territories.

Through a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Coral Reef Stewardship grant to the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, government and science officials gathered from Hawai‘i, Florida, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Attendees shared their experiences, data and information, and resources related to marine invasive species, and participated in tabletop exercises on reporting and response planning for the detection of *Unomia stolonifera* and other emerging invasive species in local and territorial waters. Participants also visited the Waikīkī Aquarium and Bishop Museum’s Invertebrate Zoology Collection for an up-close look at the species discussed.

“The Learning Exchange was an incredible opportunity to share knowledge and resources on a global scale to address marine invasive species and their destructive effects on the Earth’s reefs and marine ecosystems,” said Holly Bolick, Bishop Museum Invertebrate Zoology collections manager, and co-organizer of the event. “Our goal is to continue collaborating on this level and providing access to the Museum’s natural history specimens, research, and personnel towards this collective effort.”

A U.S. Navy benthic survey in Pearl Harbor detected an unknown soft coral, which led to the formation of a multi-agency Hawai‘i Octocorals Working Group to support and advise the Navy on its response. Bishop Museum and its partner organizations identified the octocoral species in the Harbor as *Unomia stolonifera* in 2023.

Unomia stolonifera, commonly known as the “pulse coral,” or “pulsing Xenia,” is a fast-growing “soft coral,”

or octocoral, that is native to Indonesia. It is known for its ability to spread quickly and outcompete native corals, ultimately smothering and displacing them. This species of pulse coral is believed to have also been illegally introduced to Venezuelan reefs by a private individual in the aquarium trade in the early 2000s. A second invasive species, *Capnella cf. spicata*, commonly known as Kenyan tree coral was subsequently detected growing alongside the *Unomia stolonifera* by the group.

Both are popular aquarium species that are illegal to import and possess in Hawai‘i without a special activity permit. The highest density of the two species was found close to shore near a public access pier in Pearl Harbor. Since these initial discoveries, two additional non-native marine species have been identified in the same area of the Harbor: an unknown corallimorph (another type of Cnidarian called a mushroom coral) and a species of stony coral known as “hammer coral” (*Euphyllia cf. ancora*). These two additional non-native species found in the octocoral infestation zone are also popular in the aquarium trade and further support the theory of aquarium dumping as the mode of introduction.

All the information gathered led the group to believe that illegal aquarium dumping was the probable method of introduction of the octocorals into the Harbor. Similar species of octocoral, *Xenia umbellata* and *Latissima ningalooensis*, native to the Red Sea and Australia, respectively, but also popular in marine aquariums, were also detected on Puerto Rico reefs, where a response is underway.

“The increase in marine aquarium ownership across the United States is increasing the likelihood of these species being released or intentionally outplanted onto reefs where they can cause significant harm,” said co-organizer Christy Martin of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species. “Unlike in terrestrial systems, there aren’t a lot of known, effective control tools for marine invasive species. That’s why it was so valuable to have this learning exchange, to hear how we might prepare and respond to marine invasive species, and how we can work together to support each other because the ocean connects us all.”

In 2024, Bishop Museum [launched a website](#) to raise awareness and share resources about marine invasive species, the result of a collaborative effort between the Museum and state, federal, university, and nonprofit institutions to address the situation and inform the public about how they can help.

To learn more about Aquatic Invasive Species and the efforts to combat them, please visit BishopMuseum.org/HawaiiAIS.

About: [Bishop Museum’s efforts to identify and preserve biodiversity](#)

In 1992, the Hawai‘i State Legislature designated Bishop Museum as The Hawai‘i Biological Survey (HBS), a program tasked with documenting the more than 23,000 species of plants, animals, and other organisms found throughout the Hawaiian archipelago. As a result of this initiative, Hawai‘i was the first and only state in the U.S. with a complete checklist of the approximately 17,000 terrestrial, 500 freshwater, and 5,500 marine species of plants and animals found in our islands. Bishop Museum also conducts extensive expeditions for biodiversity discovery and documentation across the Pacific, a program designated the Pacific Biological Survey (PBS). Together, these strategic initiatives are a cornerstone of the Museum’s biodiversity discovery and documentation efforts.

The data from the HBS and PBS are used by Museum research staff in conjunction with collaborative partners throughout the Pacific to develop analytical tools needed to assess overall status and trends in abundance, health, and distribution of plants and animals, as well as the ecosystems upon which humans rely. Together, these efforts aim to manage and protect the areas of highest biological and cultural significance in the face of threats from climate change and biodiversity loss.

Each of [Bishop Museum’s natural history collections](#) contributes to HBS, providing specimens, expert knowledge, staffing for fieldwork, and management of the collected specimens to preserve the records and

diversity effectively. Together, the Museum's staff conducts a coordinated inventory and monitoring program that provides the data needed to assess the overall status and trends in the abundance, health, and distribution of plants and animals, as well as the ecosystems upon which they depend.

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About Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, the State of Hawai'i Museum of Natural and Cultural History:

Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum's mission is to inspire our community and visitors through the exploration, celebration, and perpetuation of the extraordinary history, culture, and environment of Hawai'i and the Pacific. The Museum was founded in 1889 by Charles Reed Bishop in memory of his wife Bernice Pauahi Bishop, a royal descendant of King Kamehameha I. Today, the Museum thrives as an educational center for the community and is widely regarded as the world's premier institution for Hawaiian and Pacific content.

Bishop Museum's vast collections of more than 25 million objects and specimens represent nine disciplines and include more than 22 million biological specimens, over 2 million cultural objects, 115,000 historical publications, and 1 million photographs, films, works of art, audio recordings, and manuscripts. These collections tell the stories of the cultures and biodiversity of Hawai'i and the Pacific as well as the proud legacy of scholarly research spanning 130 years.

Bishop Museum proudly serves more than 200,000 visitors each year, including 20,000 children on school visits.

To learn more about the Museum's research, collections, exhibits, and programs, visit BishopMuseum.org, follow @BishopMuseum on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), visit Bishop Museum's [YouTube](#) channel, or call (808) 847-3511. Bishop Museum is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Bishop Museum is proud to be an Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action Employer, and welcomes applicants from the military, veterans, and those with disabilities. Learn about careers at Bishop Museum at BishopMuseum.org/Careers and on its [LinkedIn](#) page.

[Bishop Museum Press](#) is Hawai'i's oldest book publisher and one of the first scholarly publishers in the Western Hemisphere, and has published over 1,200 titles and distributed over 1 million books in 72 countries worldwide.

Past news releases can be viewed and downloaded at BishopMuseum.org/NewsRoom.