



BISHOP MUSEUM

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Bishop Museum Launches Website to Raise Awareness, Share Resources About Marine Aquatic Invasive Species

Honolulu, Hawai‘i — [Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum](https://www.bishopmuseum.org/HawaiiAIS/) has launched a website to raise awareness and share resources about marine aquatic invasive species (AIS), including two introduced octocorals that have currently overtaken roughly 100 acres of Pearl Harbor’s aquatic ecosystem, and continue to spread. The webpage, [BishopMuseum.org/HawaiiAIS](https://www.bishopmuseum.org/HawaiiAIS/), is 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.

The species found in Pearl Harbor, identified by the Museum and its partner institutions as *Unomia stolonifera* in 2022 and *Capnella cf. spicata* in 2023, are popular starter species for aquariums that are illegal to import to Hawai‘i without a special activity permit. The highest density of the two species of “soft corals,” or octocorals, were found close to shore near a public access fishing pier in the Harbor. 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.

Due to the rapid spread of the octocoral, *Unomia stolonifera*, certain public use areas have been temporarily closed to avoid spreading the invasive species out of the Harbor until it can be controlled.

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) 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.

Left unchecked, researchers say that the quickly spreading species could be disastrous to Hawai‘i’s coral reefs, native biodiversity, and delicate ecosystems.

“The rapid spread and expanse of *Unomia stolonifera* here in Hawai‘i is especially concerning due to its destructive nature, as seen on Venezuelan coral reefs,” said Holly Bolick, Bishop Museum Invertebrate Zoology collections manager. “At the moment, it is contained inside the Harbor but if it gets out, the effects will likely be similar as those in the Caribbean. Our main concern is keeping it from getting onto our open coral reefs.”

Unomia stolonifera is known to spread incredibly quickly, covering and smothering coral reefs. [According to the International Coral Reef Initiative \(ICRI\)](#),

Unomia stolonifera, commonly known as the “stoloniferous fire coral,” is a fast-growing soft coral that originates from the Indo-Pacific region. It is known for its ability to reproduce quickly and outcompete native corals, ultimately smothering and displacing them. It is believed to have been introduced [to Venezuelan reefs] from the aquarium trade in the early 2000s.

Since its first sightings in Valle Seco in 2007, the population has exploded along Venezuela’s coastline and has now been observed spreading east and west into the Caribbean Sea.

Due to the high fecundity, rapid growth, and absence of natural predators, U. stolonifera has proliferated vast expanses of coral reefs. This rapid colonisation has had detrimental impacts on the biodiversity of the affected ecosystems, growing over any hard substrate, including corals and seagrass. In areas most heavily impacted, the invasive soft coral now accounts for 100% of coral cover, eradicating a diverse array of native species. Ongoing research indicates that among the severely affected taxa are coral reef fishes, whose populations have suffered significant declines impacting both ecosystem function and services relied upon by many stakeholders.

One of the functions of the Bishop Museum marine AIS webpage is to provide regular updates on the octocoral situation in Hawai‘i, for stakeholders around the world to learn more about these marine AIS and related mitigation efforts.

“Bishop Museum is part of the Hawai‘i Invasive Octocorals Working Group (HIOWG) with the mission to develop, implement, and maintain a collaborative, inter-agency action plan to eradicate or contain marine AIS in Pearl Harbor, as well as create a long-term accessible record for future use,” said Bolick. “Due to the severity of the impacts of invasive species, it is imperative to increase public awareness and education about their dangers, and to do our best to help prevent future marine introductions into our coral reef ecosystems.”

Features of the Bishop Museum marine AIS webpage include:

- Most current information and photographs of the Pearl Harbor AIS and other introduced species, and what to do should you encounter them.
- Access to marine AIS resources from Bishop Museum’s Hawai‘i Biological Survey (HBS), “ecological record-keepers” with the most comprehensive historical listing of alien invasive species in Hawai‘i.
- Information on how the general public may safely and legally dispose of plants and animals from their aquariums.
- Resources for the general public to stay informed and become involved, with links to working group member organizations and citizen scientist groups.

The Hawai‘i Invasive Octocorals Working Group includes Bishop Museum, the University of Hawai‘i’s Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Hawai‘i State Department of Land and Natural Resources, Department of the Navy (Hawai‘i and Pacific branches), National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, United States Geological Survey, and other experts in the field of marine AIS and octocorals. The individuals involved include biologists, taxonomists, natural resource managers, conservation experts, and essential federal employees.

Identification of the two octocoral species in Pearl Harbor included a search through Bishop Museum’s extensive natural history database records and biological survey reports. Through this research, it was confirmed that neither species of octocoral had ever been reported from Pearl Harbor, or anywhere in Hawai‘i’s oceans.

“Once we were able to confirm this new occurrence record for Hawai‘i, we documented these two new

species in the [Hawai‘i Biological Survey](#) records,” said Bolick. “We now have a permanent record of these new octocorals in Hawai‘i, with literature and specimens that will be accessible to all and available for future use for this or other marine AIS outbreaks.”

To learn more about the two octocorals in Pearl Harbor, marine aquatic invasive species (AIS), and the efforts to address them, visit the Bishop Museum marine AIS website at: 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:

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 [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), become a fan of Bishop Museum on [Facebook](#), 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.