

Archie Kalepa SUP's Through The Grand Canyon

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Hawaiian Archie Kalepa Makes Ride of His Life: Record 187 Miles on Standup Paddleboard Through The Grand Canyon, Colorado River.



Archie Kalepa midway through his voyage down the Colorado River and Grand Canyon. Photo: Aaron Huey

Journey Explored Connection between Native Hawaiians & American Indians

(HONOLULU - October 19, 2009) Hawaiian veteran lifeguard and big-wave rider Archie Kalepa is no stranger to life-changing experiences. There have been many during his 46 years of life spent in and around the ocean. He never imagined that the fresh waters of inland America would deliver the most astounding experience of all: connecting his native Hawaiian experience to that of the American

Indians, and incidentally setting a world record of being the first to standup paddle (SUP) 187 miles through the Grand Canyon.

Kalepa, from Lahaina, Maui, was invited last month to join leaders of American Indian tribes on a 17-day rafting trip through the Grand Canyon, hosted by explore.

The decision was a “no brainer”; it would be a perfect opportunity to check one more “must do” off his life’s list and give river SUP a try. By journey’s end, Kalepa exited the Colorado River with a greater appreciation of water - not just how he rides it, but its core meaning and critical importance in the lives of both native Hawaiians and American Indians.

“There was a whole spiritual sense about that river, it’s alive,” says Kalepa. “There’s so much life in the water itself and I don’t mean what’s under the water, I mean the water. The water is alive.”

Explore brought Archie together with non-profit leaders from the Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Lakota and Anishinaabe tribes on the journey.

“(Explore) put us in an environment that we could relate to: the land and the water, which brought out the best in all of us.

“The way the American Indians think and how we Hawaiians think is so alike. So many of our spiritual beliefs are similar, so we felt like family, like cousins. We really connected. The knowledge they have of their culture goes way back, even further back than what I know of mine. I learned so much more about water than I would ever learn if I was just in Hawaii.

“When you’re put in that situation, the westernization gets stripped away and you’re back in tune with Mother Nature and your surroundings. It allows you to become more clear on your beliefs; more focused on the issue at hand, which for all of us was water. It’s a big issue, but when you look at it in that environment, it’s a simple one.”

From Kalepa’s family experiences with their taro patch in Kahana Valley, to water access issues that the native Americans face daily, they found a common bond that spans hundreds of generations. Both cultures have maintained their histories orally. Water - from the ocean or the mountains - is at the heart of many of those stories.

“In the beginning I planned to throw my board on the raft and pull it out from time to time. After that first day of paddling, and our first night around the campfire exchanging stories, I was committed to standing up the whole way. I wanted to get to the end and dedicate my standup paddle as a symbol to the native people, to show that it just takes one person to stand up and take a stance to start to make a difference.”

Along the way, Kalepa encountered rough-water rapids he describes as “five-dimensional, not three-dimensional like a wave”.

“I’ve surfed some really big waves in my life and I put that final rapid - ‘The Lava’, a class 10 rapid, right up there with them, including my 70-foot wave at Pe’ahi.”

The journey sparked a new focus in Kalepa who was moved by the stories of the Indians and their willingness to share them.

“It gets to where people don’t want to open up anymore, where they feel they have been stripped away. But the further we went, the more the walls of the canyon rose, the more the walls around the stories came down. The contributions offered by each person were tremendous. There were times sitting around the fire talking where it got really emotional. Working our way through the Grand Canyon, all those miles and rough water, and coming out at the end of it together and safe, it was unbelievable. It was the ride of my life. It made me a better waterman. It made me a better person.

“I truly want to extend my gratitude and aloha to all the folks at Explore and all the people who participated in the journey, [C4 Waterman](#) for the equipment, the river guides and Arizona river rafters.”

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