

Spring break trip to Hawaiʻi provides insight into Indigenous law

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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A group of Arizona State University law students spent a week in Hawaiʻi for spring break. And while they did take in some of the sites, sounds and tastes of the tropical destination, the trip offered much more.

The 17 students from the [Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law](#) were there to participate in a course on Indigenous law as part of ASU's [Indian Legal Program](#): "Native Hawaiian Law: Leadership in Land, Restoration and Indigenous Autonomy."

"Thanks to our partners, we made it a week to remember for the students," said [Stacy Leeds](#), Willard H. Pedrick Dean and Regents Professor at ASU Law.

ASU's Indian Legal Program, one of the most respected in the country, has conducted traveling classrooms since 2010. This was the program's first trip to Hawaiʻi.

Throughout the week, students learned about the basic foundations of Native Hawaiian law, with an emphasis on land, water and natural resources.

Many of the classes took place at the University of Hawaii William S. Richardson School of Law in Honolulu, thanks to a special partnership with ASU Law.

The curriculum included everything from the role of state and federal government in Native Hawaiian law and policy to environmental law and climate change.

The course tapped into the expertise of local attorneys, legal scholars and nonprofit leaders who provided insight into their innovative efforts to advance Indigenous autonomy in the state.

“When you look at the lineup, it’s remarkable who the students had access to this week,” Leeds said.

Legislative history

According to the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are 574 federally recognized Native American tribes in the U.S., and Native Hawaiians are not among them. The trip helped ASU Law students understand why.

“Speaking for myself, as a member of a state-recognized tribe, I generally considered federal recognition and the establishment of government-to-government relations as the end goal,” said [Ronnie D. Strode III](#), a second-year ASU Law student who took part in the course.

Strode said the class helped him expand his thinking in this area.

After the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi in 1893 and subsequent annexation by the U.S. in 1898, followed by statehood in 1959, formal treaty relationships and federal legislative acts between the U.S. and Native Hawaiians have been enacted but they are not a federally recognized tribe.

“This trip presented me with the opportunity to meet with Native Hawaiians who said they do not hold blanket support for federal recognition or even strongly oppose it,” continued Strode, who is also pursuing an [Indian Law Certificate](#) at ASU Law. “Some Native Hawaiians see federal recognition as an affront to their sovereignty as an independent nation. Grappling with and understanding the different approaches to governance for Native persons within the U.S. will allow me to more effectively advocate and represent eventual clients.”

Beyond the educational aspect, Strode said his experience in Hawaiʻi allowed him to meet and bond with classmates.

“The memories and friendships developed during this trip will last a lifetime,” he said.

[Mikaela Bledsoe Downes](#) described the trip as “amazing.” Downes is a second-year ASU Law student and a member of the Winnebago Tribe and the Chickasaw Nation.

“Everyone was incredibly welcoming and ready to teach us their way of life and their history,” she said. “They were also forthcoming in their answers to our questions. They all gave us very honest answers.”

Downes said she was struck by the struggle Native Hawaiians face to live on the land they love.

“Fifty percent of the Native Hawaiians no longer live in Hawaiʻi because of the lack of jobs and cost of housing,” she said. “My heart hurt for them because they have such a strong tie to their land and community. One of our presenters and his wife are both lawyers and they said they can barely afford to live in Hawaiʻi.”

On-the-ground education

The trip included a land cleanup service project for a local nonprofit with the University of Hawaii's law school student group. The cleanup helped restore the land to be used for an Indigenous community garden and food system.

Students also learned about the history of the island during a walking tour, had opportunities to snorkel in Turtle Canyon and visit several museums, historic and cultural sites.

Traveling classes are an important part of the ASU Law experience. The Indian Legal Program creates opportunities for students to learn from experts with annual trips to the [ASU Washington Center](#) and other places — like this year's trip to Hawaiʻi. In 2023, students visited Alaska.

“The Indian Legal Program is training future leaders of Indian country. We think it is important for the students to understand issues affecting all Indigenous people in the United States,” said [Kate Rosier](#), assistant dean for institutional advancement and community engagement and executive director of the Indian Legal Program.

“The best way to learn and understand is to be on the land and hear the stories of people,” Downes said. “Our people are ... storytellers, so hearing all that has been shared through the generations and experiencing that in real life was ... powerful and not the same as just sitting in a classroom.”

Rosier agrees.

“I think they were impressed with how welcoming everyone was with us and how much they wanted to share their story and have people understand their history,” Rosier said. “This type of trip — these traveling classrooms — play into ASU's reputation for being number one in innovation, giving students experiences that they can't get in other universities.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Law students take in the unique landscapes of the Hawaiian Islands. Photo courtesy Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law

Text image(s)



The students had the opportunity to learn from attorneys, legal scholars and nonprofit leaders who have expertise in Indigenous law in Hawai'i.

Gallery



The students learn about ʻIolani Palace, which was once the royal residence for the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi.



The students take a tour of the Hawaiʻi State Capitol.



The group poses for a photo in front of a waterfall.