

Hawaiian Words for Ocean Waves

As all language do, the Hawaiian language developed over time partly in response to the natural environment. Hawaiians have many words that refer to ocean waves. Skim the table of selected Hawaiian words and phrases and corresponding English translations to get a sense of how specific Hawaiian observations are when it comes to ocean wave behavior. Multiple expressions listed as synonyms indicate nuance and specificity.

For both native and non-native speakers cross-referencing words in the dictionary is informative. For example, looking up *nalu*, a word for wave, reveals that the word also means “to ponder or mull over” and “amniotic fluid.” Native speakers will know if the word’s other meanings are connotations, evoked as a feeling or secondary meaning associated with the word.

Wave /wāv/ noun: A long body of water curling into an arched form and breaking on the shore.

Hawaiian	English
nalu, nanu, ‘ale	ocean wave
kai pi‘i, eaea, huia, nalu pū kī	high waves
nalu ha‘i, kai po‘i; papākolea (rare)	breaking wave
kai emi, kai he‘e, nalu miki	receding wave
nalu kua loloa, lauhoa, ‘onaulu loa	long wave
nalu ‘aiō	waves that rise and fall without breaking
huia	a surfing wave
nalu ha‘i lala	wave that breaks diagonally
nalu muku, muku	broken section of wave
nalunalu	rough wave
honua nalu	base of a breaker
‘opi nalu	bend of a wave
hokua	tip of high waves
hānupanupa	surging waves

Swell /swel/ noun: A long wave on water that moves continuously without breaking.

Hawaiian	English
‘ōhū, ‘ōhuku, āhua, ‘aiō, ‘ako‘ako, ‘aui, ha‘anopu, ho‘ohua, kuahaka, kūhela, nu‘a, ōnū, ‘ōpu‘u, ōpū	swell

Surf /sɜrf/ noun: The waves of the sea as they break upon a shore or reef.

Hawaiian	English
‘ōpu‘u, kakala, lala, lauloa, muku, ‘ōhū	some types of surf
kua nalu, kūlana nalu	surf just before breaking point
kai po‘i, kuapā	breaking surf
lālahalaha	to rise and swell
he‘e, he‘e nalu	to surf
he‘e pu‘ewai	to surf to mouth of stream
pae	to mount or catch a wave
pae i ka nalu	to ride a wave into shore
pākā, kaha	to surf, as with canoe, body, board
he‘e nalu	surf rider
kaha nalu, he‘e umauma	body surfing

References

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