

Other Pacific Islander-Not Hawaii

Country of Origin: Pacific Islands located between Hawaii and Australia

Primary Language(s): Marshallese, Fijian, Tongan and hundreds more

Percent of Iowa's Population: less than 0.1%⁹

Background

The Pacific Islands consist of 3 main island regions and thousands of islands: Melanesia (bordering Northeast Australia), Micronesia (north of the Melanesian region and containing the Marshall Islands), and Polynesia (east of Micronesia and Melanesia and containing Hawaii and New Zealand). See map pictured left The Pacific Islands label generally does not include Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Japanese groups of islands. The Pacific Islands region covers more than 300,000 square miles, New Zealand and the island of New Guinea making up about nine tenths of this.

There are many diverse cultures among the different groups of people of the Pacific Islands, but also much shared cultural history. The islands are a mixture of independent states, associated states, dependent states, and parts of non-Pacific Island countries. Pacific Islanders of Guam and Northern Mariana are US Citizens, and American Samoans are considered US nationals. After World War II from 1946 to 1996, the United States, Britain and France conducted more than 315 nuclear tests in Australia and Pacific Island regions causing lasting damage to the health of the population and the environment. The Compacts of Free Association gave citizens of some of the affected areas that were under US control including Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands the ability to live, work, and go to school in the US without visas. Marshall Islanders are one of the large pockets found in Dubuque and Iowa in general. See map pictured.

Most Pacific islands are coral formations. Many islands have gradually decreased in inhabitable area through a combination of sinking and also flooding from the melting of ice caps. This will continue to force island people to migrate to new homes including the United States. Many have also moved to the United States seeking health care, employment, and educational opportunities.

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

The Pacific Island culture values family and community. Several units of extended family often live under one roof as one big family, eating together, attending appointments together, translating for each other, and taking care of each other's small children as their own.¹⁵ One Marshallese mom explained that they have tight-knit family relationships. In their etiquette, elders rank highest.⁸ Pacific Islanders are very proud of their island origins and very much miss the cultural way of life, fishing traditions, and serene landscape of their island homes.^{5,3,15} The women often wear skirts or dresses and sandals year round.¹⁵

In the early nineteenth century the majority of Pacific Islanders adopted Christianity in several forms including Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mormon and others after missionaries toured the islands preaching. Islands sometimes still incorporate traditional beliefs such as maintaining a chief, belief in multiple deities, thinking of waves or sky as spirits, and worship of sacred places, but much traditional practice has now transformed fully to Christianity.^{8,15}

Holidays & Celebrations

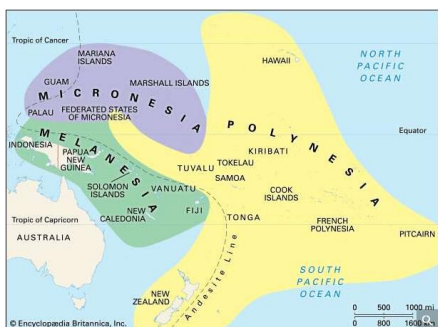
Large community feasts are a common way for Pacific Islanders to celebrate events like marriages, community events, saints' days, births, religious holidays and even funerals. Having a hog roast or cooked fish and shellfish would be typical.¹³

Pacific Islanders use storytelling, music and dance to celebrate and to pass down cultural history through the generations. They also celebrate with parades and field days, playing games, socializing, dancing and listening to music. During parades or dances during holidays and celebrations, Pacific island women often wear brightly colored dresses.¹²

Many Pacific Island groups or regions celebrate Constitution days, meaning the day each was declared self-governing. It is their Independence day, most occurring before 1980. For example the Marshall Islands celebrate their Constitution Day each May 1st when they signed their constitution and become independent of the United States.¹⁶



The Marshall Islands are comprised of 29 coral atolls and 5 islands total land mass about 1/9th the area of Dubuque.¹



The 3 main island regions of the Pacific are Micronesia (contains Marshall Islands), Melanesia, and Polynesia (contains Hawaii).⁴

Education and Literacy

According to data from the State Data Center of Iowa in 2017, 10.4% of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders age 25 and over held bachelors or other higher educational degrees, but 67.8% of the same group are high school graduates.⁹ Staff from the Dubuque Pacific Islander Project reported that education is not something that the older generations valued, but has become important to the younger generation.¹⁵

Pacific Islander Culture & Foods

Health Disparities

Obesity has been traditionally seen as beautiful and associated with health and wealth.⁷

The nuclear testing made the land of the Marshall Islands and other island regions radioactive and prevented farming. The US began to import processed foods for the people, leaving them to depend on higher calorie and lower nutrient foods.⁷

High rates of this population have developed obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer.⁵ Compared to other ethnic groups, this group has highest rates of smoking and alcohol consumption and rank lowest in prenatal care and immunization of children as well.^{8,17}

On the islands health care staff and facilities were short so conditions that are manageable in the US were considered death sentences there. Here there are efforts to help them learn the importance of preventive care and healthy lifestyle.¹⁵

Considerations for WIC

- For FOCUS race data collection, the Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Island box would be checked for an individual having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.¹⁷ Consistent with IDPH Civil Rights Training materials.
- Pacific Islanders speak softly, are very polite, and smile frequently. They are hesitant to ask questions, so it's important to educate thoroughly and explain fully items that are available to them through WIC. They are interested in the fruits and vegetables like bananas, coconuts, sweet potatoes, potatoes. Since white rice is a staple, education on using brown rice as a proxy can be helpful. ¹⁵
- Many still speak their island languages. Kids can get embarrassed when they say Marshallese words wrong. Parents and grandparents want to preserve the traditional language so commonly kids are encouraged to learn both. ^{5,15}
- Fruits and vegetables are more available and inexpensive here than in the islands, but sometimes the people gravitate towards the prepackaged foods they had been used to.¹⁵
- In working with Dubuque's Pacific Islander population, WIC staff have noted that if the grandmother or father attend the WIC appointment, they will be the spokesperson for the family. However, if the mother brings the kids to the appointment on her own she is often very capable of understanding and communicating with staff.
- The Pacific Island people enjoy a laid back culture. ¹² They often run late or no show for appointments, or walk into clinic at unscheduled times.
- Low awareness of health risks and economic access to health care are barriers for this population. Unless born here, they are not eligible for Medicaid.⁸
- Pacific Islanders need education on eating a more balanced and less processed diet to help combat their health risks. The women are primarily responsible for cooking ^{5,6,7,11,15}

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Meals are commonly eaten as a family or in social settings and often include multiple units of extended family.^{8,15}

Foods commonly eaten include staples of rice, potatoes, and yams as well as root vegetables called taro and cassava that can be used to make breads, chips, flakes and flour or as an ingredient in soups, stews or meat dishes.¹³ Any of these staples would be paired with meats like fish, chicken and pork. Meat is often fried or barbequed.¹⁵

Fruits commonly eaten are bananas, plantains, breadfruit, coconuts, and pandanus fruit. Some islands also have mangoes, papaya, and pineapple.^{6,8,15} Fruits and vegetables could be expensive and hard to come by especially in smaller outer islands.⁷

Traditional drinks included coconut milk, but evolved to include coffee and cola, and increased amounts of imported foods including tinned meats, rice, flour, and sugar, and other processed and prepackaged items.⁸

What's the Iowa Connection?

The first Pacific Island residents of Dubuque came here to take part in the University of Dubuque seminary program in 1999.¹⁰ Good experiences spread by word of mouth and Dubuque is now home to an estimated 800 Pacific Islanders. According to HHS, Iowa is not considered to be a state with a significant Pacific Islander population.¹⁷ In 2017, 3,712 Iowa residents reported they were Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander.⁹ Iowa counties with highest Pacific Island populations in descending order include Polk, Dubuque, Black Hawk, Woodbury, and Buena Vista.¹⁴



Irene Ernest works with the tomato plants.⁷
Photos by Kathy Koch.

Staff at a clinic organized a community garden project to help teach the Dubuque Marshallese population a healthier way to live by incorporating garden vegetables into diet.⁷

How are we Living?

Pacific Islanders often live with multiple extended family units under one roof, and drive, walk or use public transportation to get around.⁶ They are commonly employed as caregivers, housekeepers, dishwashers, and factory workers.¹⁵ In 2015 and the Dubuque Pacific Islander Health Project was established, helping to connect this population with health and dental care, assistance with costs, health education, and more.⁶ Other agencies offering resources include Iowa Department of Human Rights, Visiting Nurse Services, Lutheran Services of Iowa, Head Start, and Multicultural Family Center.

