

Mauna Kea and colonialism on public lands



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY ROSALYN
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If you spend much time in the American West, you're likely to see someone wearing a T-shirt that says "Public Land Owner." It's an assertion that public lands are owned by everyone and that their management is of critical importance to us all. In Hawaii, a battle over public land and Indigenous rights has complicated that sentiment for many, as Native Hawaiians find themselves forced to defend their homeland.

For weeks, thousands of Native Hawaiians have been blocking the only access road to Mauna Kea, the largest mountain in Hawaii, to oppose the construction of the \$1.4 billion Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) at its summit. After 10 years of fighting its construction, Native leaders began demonstrating after Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources issued a "notice to proceed," allowing the University of Hawaii, the permit holder for the TMT, to begin building.

The conflict on Mauna Kea — between Indigenous people and the state of Hawaii — illustrates not only the issue of how public lands are managed but also an emerging debate over how Indigenous rights to those lands are addressed. What we see in these conflicts are two ways of viewing and using public lands in the American West: as places for development and as culturally important landscapes.

As an Indigenous person, I can identify with Native Hawaiians who want to save what is left of their sacred mountain and their right to access it, before it is overdeveloped. As a scholar, however, with an undergraduate degree in physics, no less, I understand and even sympathize with scientists who want to build one of the world's largest telescopes in order to better understand the mysteries of our universe. A telescope on top of a mountain is ideal — but perhaps not on this mountain.

As governments push to further develop public lands, places Indigenous people see as their last refuge, conflicts between Native people and federal or state governments will only increase and intensify in the coming years.

Colonization of Hawaii began in the late 18th century. American businessmen continued the process of dispossessing land and resources when they overthrew the Native Hawaiian monarchy in 1893, later ceding their "public lands" to the U.S. government via annexation in 1898. Native Hawaiians have always contended that their land was illegally taken, a view that President Clinton codified in his 1993 apology. When Hawaii became a state in 1959, the U.S. transferred what was left of these public lands to the new state. Today, Mauna Kea is no longer owned by the Native Hawaiian community. It is now on state public lands.

Mauna Kea's story, unfortunately, is not unique.

Twenty years ago, the Apache in Arizona tried to stop the construction of the Mount Graham International Telescope on their sacred mountain in Coronado National Forest. More recently, we have witnessed similar struggles at Bears Ears in Utah and the Badger-Two Medicine in Montana, where, despite Indigenous protests, protections for important



Native lands have been removed or put into question. Demonstrators gather on July 15 to block the road at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain. Since then, thousands of Native Hawaiians have come together to maintain the blockade.

CALEB JONES/AP IMAGES

Public lands are often the only places where Native American sacred landscapes still exist since so much land was lost to conquest and colonization, and they are among the few places where Native people can practice their religions, hunt, fish or gather their sacred medicines. Hawaiian leaders have consistently stated that the demonstration at Mauna Kea is not about "science vs. religion." It is about development on public lands and the Native people's right to steward those lands.

"This mountain represents more than just their building they want to build," Hawaiian activist and elder Walter Ritte told the *Hawaii Tribune Herald*. "This mountain represents the last thing they want to take that we will not give them."

Mauna Kea is named for the god Wakea or "sky father," one of the nine gods or goddesses connected to the mountain. Mo'olelo, the narratives passed down through generations of Native Hawaiians, tell the histories of these sacred landscapes.

But what is their future on public lands? This past week, William Pendley was appointed the acting director of the Bureau of Land Management. Pendley, formerly president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, has a long history of advocating for development on public lands — including Native American sacred landscapes. Most recently, he defended an oil and gas company's lease in Montana's Badger-Two Medicine region — on my ancestral homelands and the sacred lands of the Blackfeet.

Earthjustice and a coalition of Native American groups have asked the Department of Interior for Pendley to recuse himself as the attorney of record for all matters concerning that lease. To date, he has not done so.

I went to Mauna Kea when the demonstrations began to stand with Native Hawaiians because we face a similar foe, which 30-year old Native Hawaiian leader Kahookahi Kanuha, passionately spoke about, "Our *aina* (land) is in danger. Our *lahui* (nation) is in danger. ... If we want to stop this, if we want to beat this settler-state system that is forcing itself upon us, we need to rise up and stand together."

It is time for "public-land owners" in the American West to stand with Indigenous people to protect public lands from development, because these conflicts — like the fight over Mauna Kea — will only continue to grow. □

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