

# Astronomers And Native Hawaiians Battle Over Sacred Mountain

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It's the highest peak in the Pacific - a dormant volcano on America's island state of Hawaii known as Mauna Kea. The mountain's 4,205-meter summit is home to some of the largest astronomical telescopes in the world.

But for Hawaiian natives, Mauna Kea is a religious site, home to their mightiest gods and the burial place of their ancestors. A plan to put more telescopes on the mountain is being opposed by native Hawaiians and the environmental community.

Kealoha Pisciotta comes to Mauna Kea to worship her ancestors. On this cool evening, she parks on the side of a steep gravel road that leads to the summit. Her friend Paul Neves blows a resonant tone from a conch shell to announce their arrival, then they ask permission from the mountain spirit to enter this sacred space.

Gazing at the setting sun, Kealoha Pisciotta walks off the road and down the barren terrain to gather some stones. She and Paul Neves begin piling the stones into a shrine to her ancestors with stones gathered on Mauna Kea shrine.

"All of our families connect here, " she says. It is essentially the place where Hawaiians mark their beginning. Here is where I place my family shrine."

"Notice how perfect those stones are we picked, as if we were masons,"

Paul Neves says. "The stones are telling you, 'Pick these up. Put these over here.'"

According to legend, Mauna Kea is the mountain of the gods. It is here that Wakea - the sky father and Papa his wife - gave birth to the Hawaiian Islands. Ms. Pisciotta says construction on the summit has disturbed the land, polluted the water, cut into volcanic cinder cones and desecrated ancient burial grounds.

"My historical family shrine has been taken and never been recovered," she says, adding if you place new stones for a shrine, you have to be careful where you put them. "The new ones we placed, we just learned today that that was taken (away). My family ashes also have been destroyed."

The Office of Mauna Kea Management - founded in 2000 - helps the University of Hawaii manage the mountain as a science center and cultural reserve. Director Bill Stormont says the Office seeks to balance the interests of astronomers, native Hawaiians and environmentalists.

"I don't think that there is any denying - and NASA's environmental impact statement says so - that the past activities in astronomy development (telescope construction) have had a significant impact on the environmental and cultural resources of the mountain," he says and adds, "That is done. What we do from here on is very important. How do we adequately address the cultural and natural resources impacts of any new project?"

Mr. Stormont says the Office is trying to move forward responsibly. "I think that you jump through every hoop the community asks you to," he says.

"You don't come up short and do just an environmental assessment

because some 'legal eagle' (lawyer) says you have to. You adequately address the cultural impacts and mitigate those as best you can. There are a lot of different things that need to happen, but what we need to do is to ensure that the community is listened to. That has been the biggest problem."

Kealoha Pisciotta is among a group of Native Hawaiian activists who have filed multiple lawsuits to stall a plan to build four to six small telescopes. The U.S. space agency, NASA, has endorsed the project saying that it will do little harm to the environment. Final go-ahead rests with the University of Hawaii, which leases the land from the state.

Kealoha Pisciotta - a former telescope operator herself - doesn't dismiss the value of astronomy. She wants greater control over her cultural destiny. "You know the biggest claim that happens up here in terms of astronomy is that astronomy is necessary to search for life in the universe," she says.

"That is a great and noble endeavor and we all support that. But we don't think that astronomy or science that claims that should also require desecration or threats to endangered species. I don't (believe) that good science would want to do that. Good science would want to preserve and uphold all of those things including traditions that date back millennia."

Rolf Kudritzki - a native of Germany - is director of the University of Hawaii Institute for Astronomy that manages the Mauna Kea observatories. He says science and culture can co-exist on the mountain. "I think that it is more a matter of respect and willingness to be in a dialogue and also eventually of accepting the thought that science cannot have everything," he says. "You have to be careful in the way you proceed and develop things in the future."

Kealoha Pisciotta prays that she has a voice in determining a future that

protects the past.

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