

Telescope foes tie together, block road to Hawaii summit

July 15 2019, by Caleb Jones And Jennifer Sinco Kelleher



Native Hawaiian activists gather at the base of Hawaii's Mauna Kea, Sunday, July 14, 2019. Hundreds of demonstrators are gathered at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. State and local officials will try to close the road to the summit of Mauna Kea Monday morning to allow trucks carrying construction equipment to make their way to the top. Officials say anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protestors have blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction and have been arrested. (AP Photo/Caleb

Jones)

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered Monday at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred.

At about daybreak, a group of kupuna, or elders, sitting in chairs tied themselves together with rope and blocked the road to the summit of Mauna Kea. Another group of protesters lay prone on the ground, with their arms shackled under a grate in the road.

Around them, protesters sang and chanted.

The road was later officially closed, hours after it was essentially blocked by protesters. The elders tied together were expecting to be arrested.

After two protest leaders spoke with police, they addressed the crowd and told them anyone who didn't move would be arrested. The group would move aside, but the elders were expected to remain, protest leaders Kaho'okahi Kanuha and Andre Perez said.

Officials said anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protesters who blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction have been arrested. No arrests were immediately reported Monday morning.

Telescope opponent Jennifer Leina'ala Sleightholm said she expects protests to remain peaceful. "I don't anticipate anybody will get out of hand," she said. "We have never given them any reason to think that we would."



The sun sets behind telescopes at the summit of Mauna Kea, Hawaii's tallest mountain, Sunday, July 14, 2019. Hundreds of demonstrators gathered at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. State and local officials will try to close the road to the summit of Mauna Kea Monday morning to allow trucks carrying construction equipment to make their way to the top. Officials say anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protestors have blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction and have been arrested. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

She said she hopes the construction convoys turn around and leave.

"I think I know what will happen, but what I hope will happen is I hope

that they would just turn around and save our kupuna," she said, using the Hawaiian word for elders.

A puuhonua, or place of refuge, set up at the base of Mauna Kea won't be swept by authorities, Kanuha and Perez told protesters after consulting with police. Protesters planned to stay there overnight.

Scientists hope the massive telescope they planned for the site—a world-renowned location for astronomy—will help them peer back to the time just after the Big Bang and answer fundamental questions about the universe.

But some Native Hawaiians consider the land holy, as a realm of gods and a place of worship.



Native Hawaiian activists pray at the base of Hawaii's Mauna Kea, background, on Sunday, July 14, 2019. Hundreds of demonstrators are gathered at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. State and local officials will try to close the road to the summit of Mauna Kea Monday morning to allow trucks carrying construction equipment to make their way to the top. Officials say anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protestors have blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction and have been arrested. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Groups of activists sang and prayed at the base of the mountain on Sunday afternoon. They declared the area, which is well off the highway at the intersection of the mountain's access road, a place of refuge and safety.

"This is Hawaiian homelands," said Kealoha Pisciotto, one of the protest leaders. "We're clearly out of their way, we're not obstructing anything, everyone is in ceremony."

The project already has been delayed by years of legal battles and demonstrations, drawing attention from the likes of "Aquaman" actor Jason Momoa, who has Native Hawaiian ancestry and has voiced opposition to the telescope.

Scientists selected Mauna Kea in 2009 after a five-year, worldwide search for the ideal site.

Protests disrupted a groundbreaking and Hawaiian blessing ceremony at the site in 2014. After that, the demonstrations intensified.



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Construction stopped in April 2015 after protesters were arrested for blocking the work. A second attempt to restart construction a few months later ended with more arrests and crews pulling back.

But Hawaii's Supreme Court has ruled the construction is legal, permits are in place, and the state has given the company behind the telescope a

green light to resume its efforts. The company is made up of a group of universities in California and Canada, with partners from China, India and Japan.

According to the University of Hawaii, ancient Hawaiians considered the location kapu, or forbidden. Only the highest-ranking chiefs and priests were allowed to make the long trek to Mauna Kea's summit above the clouds.

Today, the university leases the land at the summit from the state for existing telescopes and observatories on the summit. A road built for telescope access decades ago is used by thousands of tourists and locals each year, including Native Hawaiians who go there to pray.

Supporters of the \$1.4 billion giant telescope say the cutting-edge instrument will not only make important scientific discoveries but bring educational and economic opportunities to Hawaii.



A telescope is shown at the summit of Hawaii's Mauna Kea, Sunday, July 14, 2019. Hundreds of demonstrators are gathered at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. State and local officials will try to close the road to the summit of Mauna Kea Monday morning to allow trucks carrying construction equipment to make their way to the top. Officials say anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protestors have blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction and have been arrested. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

The telescope's primary mirror would measure 98 feet (30 meters) in diameter. It would be three times as wide as the world's largest existing visible-light telescope, with nine times more area.

Gov. David Ige said unarmed National Guard units will be used to transport personnel and supplies and enforce road closures, but they will not be used in a law enforcement capacity during planned protests.

In a news conference Sunday, Ige said that he "respected the right of people to protest" at the telescope site as long as protesters behave lawfully.

"As construction begins, our number one priority is keeping everyone safe," Ige said, adding that he wants to make sure construction workers and truck drivers have unimpeded access to the telescope site.



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Citation: Telescope foes tie together, block road to Hawaii summit (2019, July 15) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-hawaii-activists-protesting-telescope.html>

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