



Nearly 14,000 feet high and remote, the summit of Mauna Kea is prized by those searching space. But it is also sacred to native Hawaiians.

RICHARD WAINSCOAT University of Hawaii
Institute of Astronomy file, 1998.

My View: Hawaiians, mountain in 'Avatar'-like struggle

By Tom Peek

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If you're one of the millions who sat riveted to James Cameron's blockbuster movie Avatar, you probably sympathized with the indigenous Na'vi when American colonists bulldozed their magical rain forest to mine unobtainium, the prized mineral on Pandora, planet Polyphemus' moon.

When the corporate/scientific/military confederation "negotiated" with Na'vi elders to quell growing unrest – bearing the usual "community benefits" trinket – you probably groaned. And when the invaders, unable to cajole the natives, bulldozed their Tree of Souls, where guiding ancestors' voices could be heard, and bombed their giant Hometree dwelling, did your fists clench with rage?

Were you relieved – maybe you even cheered aloud – when the native defenders turned back the invaders before they could destroy their holiest Tree of Souls, connecting place to their deity, Eywa?

If you responded like many people did in the Hawaii theater where I saw Avatar, the answer is probably yes.

It doesn't take a cultural anthropologist to recognize Avatar's story line parallels in Hawaii, except that in the movie, ambitious (if sympathetic) biologists rather than Christian missionaries laid the groundwork for business and military interests, using genetically engineered human-Na'vi hybrids to infiltrate the culture. Unlike on Pandora, it took a century of bulldozing Hawaii's revered places to finally reach native Hawaiians' holiest spot – 14,000-foot Mauna Kea. Here, too, people connect with ancestors and deities.

Leaving the theater, I bumped into some Hawaiian friends waiting for the next show, a family with deep ancestral roots to Mauna Kea. This got me thinking about the campaign by the University of California and Caltech (allied with University of Hawaii astronomers and pro-business politicians) to bulldoze a pristine plain below the mountain's already-developed summit cones to add another giant observatory to their science colony – the Thirty Meter Telescope, or TMT.

The California astronomers' "unobtainium" quest – research papers revealing "the secrets of the universe" and identifying planets beyond our solar system – is certainly more noble than mining minerals, but it's another example of promoting one culture's notion of progress by overriding another's reverence for the land. As in the movie, behind the Mauna Kea invaders stands the big money of a starry-eyed entrepreneur, Intel co-founder and telescope donor Gordon Moore.

For Hawaiians, Mauna Kea's summit is where their genesis story took place; it's the burial ground of their most revered ancestors. Hawaiians still conduct traditional spiritual and astronomical ceremonies there, despite the visual and noise intrusions of 20 telescopes crowding the summit. Biologists also revere the mountaintop, home to species found nowhere else on Earth, including plants and insects that rival those in Cameron's film.

Decades of insensitive development have fueled public anguish over Mauna Kea's industrialization, replete with weeping elders and young activists gritting their teeth in rising frustration. Two legislative audits lambasted state agencies for collusion with astronomy interests, and two courts ruled against the last UC/Caltech telescope project – the Keck Outriggers – for violating state and federal environmental and cultural laws, one ruling halting the project.

Seeking a peaceful solution to the increasingly polarized controversy, Hawaiians and local Sierra Club leaders met last year in private with TMT board chairman and UC Santa Barbara Chancellor Henry Yang, Caltech President Jean-Lou Chameau and a Moore representative, to implore the Californians to build the TMT at their second-choice site in Chile.

Ignoring all that, TMT officials decided in July to forge ahead with their Mauna Kea plans, pulling out all the stops to get what they desire. But this is America, not Pandora, so instead of enlisting military mercenaries, as in the movie, the Hawaii invaders hired an army of attorneys, lobbyists and planners to put a positive spin on their intrusive project and get around environmental and cultural laws governing the state conservation district where the telescope colony resides.

Hawaiians and environmentalists are again forced to defend in court the state and federal laws designed to protect places like Mauna Kea and native people like the Hawaiians – the same laws the last UC/Caltech project violated.

After spending tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars supporting California astronomers' fight against the islanders, the University of Hawaii (desirous of sharing TMT's prestige and precious telescope time), recently asked Hawaii's legislature for \$2.1 million to "ensure" the TMT bid. Local businessmen and politicians are being courted by astronomers – and pressured by powerful members of Hawaii's congressional delegation – to back a huge project that will bring lucrative construction contracts to the summit.

Last month, the same Hawaii judge who in 2007 halted the previous UC/Caltech project dismissed islanders' first legal challenge in the TMT battle – while observatory and construction workers picketed his courthouse with pro-TMT signs.

Whether that decision means Hawaii's judges are now under intense pressure to support TMT is anyone's guess. But if islanders are prevented from using the legal system to protect their sacred mountaintop, what choices remain for them?

Fortunately, no one is talking about following the Na'vi's tactic of fierce resistance – aloha is too strong a tradition here.

Even so, peaceful civil disobedience could be just around the corner if islanders' next day in court is like their last one.

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