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Whittier Student Fights for Ancestral Hawai'i

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Whittier Student fights for Ancestral Hawai'i

Activists challenge latest telescope project slated for sacred Mauna Kea



Elena Backus y Herrera

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“It’s powerful to see that this is the beginning...
Actually, I take that back. This is the continuation of
a long history of resistance against environmental
racism.”

It’s raining in Southern California and The Spot is filled with college students escaping the drizzle. A girl in a windbreaker rushes in, her long hair covered by a purple beanie, and slides into a booth while flashing a bright smile. Her name is Kealohi Minami, or simply Kea. You may see her on Whittier College campus with flowers in her hair and earrings inscribed with “decolonize.” Or maybe you’ll spot her at a local strike or protest holding a microphone and spreading awareness of issues such as environmental injustice targeting indigenous communities, especially Native Hawaiians.

Minami’s parents are Hawaiian and Vietnamese, but she was born and raised on the

coast of Southern California. Minami says she holds both cultures close to her heart and has always strongly identified with them. “I’ve continued to dance hula with a hālau, which is a formal setting with teachers and classes, which I do about twice a week. It’s nice because the whole point is not only learning to dance but learning the meaning and words before you can dance. Its called kauna,” Minami says, writing down the word as she explains its meaning.

Minami does not speak Hawaiian fluently but has learned many terms through kauna, the required study of the meanings of the dances. Minami dances with the same hālau teacher that her father danced with and studies the same things he learned. Her cross-cultural identity and activism has sparked her interest in the protests over telescopes littering Mauna Kea the iconic promontory that is the island of Hawai’i’s most recognizable geographic feature.



Telescopes litter that landscap atop Mauna Kea (photo: Hawaii Magazine)

The protests are in response to the proposed installation of a new Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) atop the Big Island’s iconic dormant volcano. Mauna Kea’s peak reaches 13,803 feet above sea level, the highest point in Hawai’i. When measured from its underwater base, Mauna Kea measures 33,000 feet, making it the tallest mountain in the world. Mauna Kea is sort of like Mount Olympus to Hawaiians — where they believe their gods originated from. It is the firstborn and therefore the most important. The mountain is sacred to many Native Hawaiians and widely respected by non-natives living on the islands. Not surprisingly, many natives view putting man-made structures on Mauna Kea as a desecration.

. . .

“You don’t have to be Hawaiian to understand how important the mountain is to everyone.” — Kea Minami

Aside from the sacredness of the mountain, Mauna Kea is also essential to the ecosystem, providing watersheds throughout the island. These watersheds are critical to sustaining the sufficient quantity and quality of water along with providing a habitat for the diverse ecosystem, including many endangered species native to the island.

The proposed TMT isn’t the only telescope to be on the summit of Mauna Kea. Favorable conditions, such as a stable atmosphere, high aridity, and elevation make the summit idea for stargazing. There are currently thirteen telescopes administered by various institutions and government agencies representing 11 countries. There are also five decommissioned telescopes at the summit.

“The decommissioned telescopes are taking up space, and the waste is still up there... so we don’t think another one should be put up if nothing has been cleared,” Minami explains to me. Due to the uncleared telescopes, there is concern that they will

continue to sit and desecrate the sacred land.

Anita Hofscheider, a reporter for the *Honolulu Civil Beat*, explains the facilities have a history of chemical and waste spills. Management has improved due to a switch in management by TMT International Observatory, who proposed the new telescope in 2013. TMT plans on building the telescope on a new site, instead of utilizing the space of the decommissioned telescopes, and have acknowledged the threats posed to the ecosystem.

Hawaiian Senator Stanley Chang supports the telescope, but agrees with the concerns protestors have raised over the installation and management of the mountain. As he told the *Civil Beat*, “I think it is very reasonable that they would want some accountability for those issues, and to address some of them in a positive way, a thoughtful way, that takes care of all of the stakeholders before getting into that conversation about a new telescope.”

On September 20th, 2019 approximately 8,000 people attended the climate strike in Downtown Los Angeles. Minami was one of them and she used the platform to spread awareness of the environmental injustices occurring in Hawai'i. “The protest was really good, there was a surprising amount of response to seeing my sign. I was really surprised, a handful of folks came up and thanked me for bringing attention to the issue here in California,” Minami says of the climate strike.





Minami at LA Climate Strike on September 20th, 2019. (Photo courtesy of @mskealohi on Instagram)

She explains that California is connected to issue deeply through the observatory donors including California Institute of Technology and a handful of UC schools. Another goal of Minami's is to call out the California donors contributing to the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope. "It's hard to push this movement further from California," she says, "but putting pressure on these donors and calling them out for supporting these efforts of environmental injustice, environmental racism."

Calling, emailing, and boycotting these institutions is best way to mobilize on this matter according to Minami, who informs me that the telescopes atop Mauna Kea aren't the only hazards occurring in Oahu. She shows me an Instagram post from @Ku_Kiai_Kahuku explaining the current protests in the town of Kahuku, a

predominantly native community. Kahuku is facing the threat of wind-energy farms some say operate too closely to homes, schools and farms.

The wind farm also threatens the survival of Nene (or Hawaiian Goose) which is the official state bird and the 'ope'ape'a (Hoary Bat,) the state's official land mammal. Kahuku natives have been protesting the farms and bringing awareness to the issue, but so far haven't been able to hold up construction of the wind farm as they have done with the TMT.



Minami expects big things from these protests. “I think this is the start of a whole social movement. I think its woken up the whole nation of Hawai’i,” she says. “It’s kind of beautiful because whoever you are on the island, you have to have a stance — you can’t stay neutral. Everyone has a stake in this.”

Her goal is to mobilize people, Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian. She say others can get involved by, “supporting any indigenous movements, either by signing a petition or going out and protesting [...] uplifting indigenous voices and understanding their struggles and history of resistance is the best way to be an ally and show solidarity.”

Minami, a political science major, is now considering doubling in sociology after taking a course with Professor Overmier-Velasquez who teaches a class called Indigenous Peoples Movements at Whittier which focuses on indigenous activism in Latin America. “It’s such an amazing course,” she says, beaming, “It’s helped me understand how social movements help with the progress of a nation. I didn’t expect it, but its way to applicable to my life. I feel like she just gave us all the tools for creating a social movement to create change in this world.”

For more information and updates on the protests at Mauna Kea follow @ProtectMaunaKea on Instagram.

Thanks to Joe Donnelly (hide).

Mauna Kea

Indigenous Activism

Environmental Racism

Environmental Injustice

Hawaii