April 14, 2015

Aloha nui kākou,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony in regards to the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). It is my sincere hope that these words will be considered as you move forward in your discussions regarding Mauna Kea and the TMT.

I considered starting this testimony with a statement about the significance of Mauna Kea, a mountain that feeds me in almost every possible way: culturally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. However, in following recent discussions about the mountain, particularly focused on movements to halt construction, I have been disheartened at the way that our culture has been used as a means of discrediting and disregarding our concerns. News outlets continuously state that those protecting the mountain are “Natives” claiming that Mauna Kea is sacred. These “Natives” are being portrayed as non-progressive, anti-science, backwards inhabitants, merely taking up space and getting in the way. I need not give you a lecture on how these were some of the primary strategies of colonialism and how they have been used in the past to justify imperialism around the world. What I do want to emphasize is that as a result of such portrayals—which seem to be a deliberate attempt to extinguish our voices—a key fact has been completely ignored: while Hawaiians are at the forefront of this movement to halt construction, they are joined by people of all backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs, all fighting for the safety and the future of Mauna Kea together.

Therefore, before you have the chance to discount my testimony on the grounds that it is yet another statement arguing for the sacredness of the mountain, I will state that this is so much more than a cultural issue; it is a social, environmental, and political one as well. Thus, any attempt to create and perpetuate false binaries between those standing for and against the TMT should be abandoned before we continue. This is not about natives vs. astronomers, about culture vs. science, about going to the future vs. staying in the past. As long as we continue to think in this way, we will never progress. Therefore, before you are tempted to quickly categorize my testimony as pro-native and pro-culture and therefore somehow anti-astronomy and anti-science, let me complicate the issue for you and let you know why, on a much larger level, construction on Mauna Kea should stop.

When the Board of Regents agreed to sublease land on the mountain for the construction of the TMT, it positioned economic and academic concerns above environmental, social, and cultural ones. As an alumnus and a past-employee of the University of Hawai‘i system, I am a strong proponent of scholarly pursuits, an advocate of research, and a supporter of the acquisition of knowledge. As a resident of Hawai‘i, and particularly of Hawai‘i Island, I am also in favor of strengthening Hawai‘i’s economy. I am not willing, however, to put those efforts before the life of the land and the life of the people. To do so is to tread on shaky moral ground. There must be other ways; we must have other options, and I am confident that as an institution of higher learning that the University of Hawai‘i can and should be at the forefront of finding those alternatives.
If construction of the TMT is allowed to continue, I fear that there will be huge social and environmental ramifications, and that the University Board of Regents who subleased the land will be at the center of them. To support the construction of the TMT on Mauna Kea is to support the continued oppression of a people, a people who have for too long suffered the effects of silencing and historical erasure. To support construction will be to follow in that immoral vein, continuing to disregard our voices and our concerns. As evidenced by the current movement to protect the mountain, however—a movement that has garnered worldwide support—we will not be silenced.

Thus, you have the unique opportunity, now, to make a difference: to not continue in the tradition of disregard, and to truly listen to the people who are standing, singing, praying, and fighting for the mountain. We come from different backgrounds and have different belief systems. Yet, we are all united in our love for Mauna Kea, and as a result, are cultivating a culture of regard, a culture of respect, and a culture of true love for the land that we are all fortunate enough to call home. As renowned postcolonial scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong’o once said, our cultures carry “the values, ethical moral and aesthetic by which people conceptualize or see themselves and their place in history and the universe.” Thus, when I speak of culture, I am not only referring to the culture of Native Hawaiians. More importantly, I am also referring to the culture that we are actively creating now—all of us involved, regardless of ethnic background. It is a culture built on the fact that our protection of the mountain speaks to our role and our place in history and in the wider universe.

Those of us who stand to protect Mauna Kea stand with the conviction that what we are doing is what is right for the life of the land and the life of our future. I therefore ask you to think about the values by which you see yourselves and your place in history. The University of Hawai‘i has the opportunity now to either be revolutionary in their choosing to stand against further construction or to forever seal their place in history as the entity that allowed for the further desecration of a place, a people, and a hope for the future. I await your decision.

I end this testimony with respect for the difficult position that you are in. However, I also conclude with a statement of solidarity, on behalf of all of us who stand for Mauna Kea, and who are in an equally difficult position, sacrificing our time, our energy, our jobs, and for some, even our freedom, to protect the mountain. In 1893, just a few months after the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom, a famed composer named Ellen Kekohiwiakalani Wright Predegrast published a mele, or song, in the Hawaiian language newspaper, Ka Leo o ka Lahui, in which she proclaimed:

_Ua ēwe, ua malu, ua paʻa_

_Eia i ka piko o Wākea._

_We are rooted, we are protected, we are steadfast_

_Here in the naval of Wākea._

Like those who fought for their rights and who raised their voices in the nineteenth century, we stand here, now, rooted and steadfast in our efforts to protect Mauna Kea, the mountain of Wākea: the piko, or the center of our very existence. Thus, we will not be silenced and we will not be ignored. E kū kiaʻi mauna kākou! Stand with us!

Me ka mahalo,

Emalani Case