Testimony Against Construction of Thirty Meter Telescope and Concern over Mismanagement of Mauna Kea by the University of Hawaii

Chad Ahia
Hilo, Hawaii

Dear Chair Moore and members of the Board:

The broad public furor against the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) project is proof that the University has overstepped what is permissible and has continued to mismanage Mauna Kea. According to a recent snap poll of 7,320 people by Pacific Business News, 63% of respondents do not approve of building TMT.¹

In my opinion, public disapproval was caused by the University: (1) blending the narratives from native Hawaiian culture and astronomers on the importance of Mauna Kea and then thinking that it could control this narrative and essentially usurp native Hawaiian culture, and (2) by thinking that the issues with development on Mauna Kea is transactional and could be bought.

Because Mauna Kea is the piko of Hawaiian creation and the “piko” of modern astronomy’s view of the universe does not mean that building another telescope and destroying more virgin untouched land is culturally acceptable. Trying to cloak misdeed in native Hawaiian cultural narrative is offensive and wrong-headed. In fact, the TMT board is still trying to offensively cloak themselves by misconstruing the views of ali‘i by misquoting King Kalakaua on their website.² King Kalakaua was welcoming English astronomers coming to view the transit of Venus from his backyard in Honolulu and not from sacred wahi pana like Mauna Kea or Haleakala.³ The ali‘i in fact thought that Mauna Kea was sacred then and is sacred now. Queen Emma, hailing from a lineage of chiefs from Ka‘u on Hawaii island, hiked to the summit of Mauna Kea on foot to bathe in Lake Waiau as a symbol of her acceptance from the gods to vie with Kalakaua for the monarchy.⁴ A modern descendant of the Kalakaua family also apparently considers Mauna Kea to be sacred and is underwriting the “protectors” in their continued protest

⁴ Hawaiian culture and Maunakea. http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/info/vis/culture.html
against the University. The University and the TMT only erode trust with native Hawaiians by such tactics.

The University again got it wrong by thinking that it could buy native Hawaiian resistance. Across cultures, the concept of the sacred and the profane sets clear delineation between what is set aside as special and what is not. The sacredness of Mauna Kea to native Hawaiians cannot be bought with profane US dollars. Either the University administration does not think anything is sacred and all can be bought or has secretly thought that only building large mirrors and gathering photons is a sacred activity and all else is profane. The University has deliberately chosen to exalt one culture and demolish another.

Astronomy, thinking of itself as the noble science, is now beginning to emulate the worse examples of abuse by more ignoble sciences. Mauna Kea and TMT threatens to become astronomy’s Tuskegee. With TMT, astronomy will get its way by deception, no matter the direct harm to those astronomers think of as “not one of us” or “them” or “those Hawaiians”. The direct harm to native Hawaiians is not justified by the expected benefit of proving abstract physics theories. This must stop. This is unproductive to the TMT project, to the future of astronomy in Hawaii, to the University as a Hawaiian place of learning, and to the State of Hawaii and its constitutional duties to native Hawaiians.

The way forward is to reason with the TMT board and convince them that building TMT is unproductive for them and unproductive for Hawaii. TMT will become the lightning rod that will cause a political uproar that will lead the University to lose the renewal of its Master Lease for Mauna Kea in 2033. This is unproductive for the TMT board because after $1.5 billion of investment, they will get barely 10 years of use from the telescope before it would need to be decommissioned. This is unproductive for the University because it will lose the Mauna Kea science reserve. This is unproductive for native Hawaiians because it will be another physical wound to Mauna Kea and to Hawaiian culture. Furthermore, the University should work diligently to prove its stewardship of Mauna Kea by first decommissioning unfunded and obsolete telescopes and showing native Hawaiians and the general public that it can restore land as it says it can. The University should also help the other existing telescopes improve their environmental and cultural safety and increase their funding for educational outreach. Much of the lost goodwill and trust will take time to regain, but with patience and pono actions, it is possible.

Thank you.