



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / JULY 2019

Dexter Kaiama held his hands high as a tribute to Mauna Kea before a line of kupuna who formed a human barricade in 2019 to stop construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope.

Science should honor the answer: ‘No’

By Kealoha Pisciotta

The recent National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Decadal Survey on Astronomy and Astrophysics for the 2020s (Astro2020) prioritizes U.S. funding of the Thirty Meter Telescope — with its contentious preferred site on Mauna Kea — continuing America’s legacy of colonialism and oppression of Indigenous Kanaka Maoli. The NAS justifies its support of this divisive project with its ambition to keep supremacy in ground-based astronomy from Europe, now building a 39-meter telescope.

The NAS’s decision to salvage the TMT glosses over the project’s many obstacles — decades of opposition to the Mauna Kea site in hearings, courtrooms and at protests on the summit access road, including the mass arrest of elders; ongoing legal challenges from flouting state and federal laws; insufficient funds to complete and operate the telescope (even were it to obtain the \$800 million in National Science Foundation funding the NAS proposes); unresolved “technical risks” with aspects of the telescope that could delay the project; a state lease to the mountaintop that expires in 2033 with talk of a new lease already generating opposition; and TMT partners that according to media reports are divided over whether to build on Mauna Kea or in the Canary Islands.

While the NAS report acknowledges a “lack of authentic partnership with Kanaka Maoli” that “puts into question the integrity upon

which scientific discovery is realized,” it fails to recognize the lack of “clear, prior and informed consent” of Hawaii’s Indigenous people for use of their traditional lands, as called for in Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Instead, the NAS proposes ramping up “community engagement” with millions more in funding for what can only be surmised as intensified public relations and renewed attempts to financially buy off opposition groups and individuals. This is the same disingenuous strategy Kanaka Maoli have endured for decades from uncompromising American astronomers who refuse to accept “no” for an answer, no matter how often we express it.

Astronomy’s next decade should be about honoring that “no” and cleaning up and de-occupying Mauna Kea, not launching new political efforts to manufacture the illusion of consent. As long as one group of people — profoundly tied to this sacred mountain — are being harmed by the ambitions of the American scientific community, that community cannot claim their endeavor is good for humanity or a step toward genuine human progress. Or do they not — even now in the 21st century — consider

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Kealoha Pisciotta, a leader and litigant in the effort to protect Mauna Kea, is president of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou; previously, she worked for 12 years as a telescope systems specialist with the James Clerk Maxwell telescope on Mauna Kea.

Indigenous people part of humanity, a hurtful ethnocentric prejudice we’ve suffered since our first contact with people from the West?

Be that as it may, the NAS is now responsible for whatever conflicts ensue from their decision to salvage the TMT and keep its Mauna Kea option alive, including potential state-sanctioned police aggression against mountain protectors, harm that will then be inflicted in NAS’s name.

One thing the Astro2020 report achieves — that its authors likely didn’t anticipate — is that it further emboldens Kanaka Maoli opposition to the desecration of our sacred mountain and fortifies our

dedication to do that in aloha. Our cultural commitment to love, compassion and non-violence — exemplified by our sacred tradition of Kapu Aloha — should be acknowledged and respected, not ignored by ambitious American astronomers.

Aloha is needed now more than ever in today’s world of heightened divisions, polarization, oppression and violence. Genuine cross-cultural respect and authentic compromise from the American scientific community will help lead society to real progress, and to a better, more humane science, too.