

Are We Doomed?

# Is There Environmental Racism In Hawaii?

Race relations in Hawaii are different than many other places in the country, but that doesn't mean that racism hasn't affected the health of communities of color.

By Claire Caulfield / June 15, 2020



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The term “environmental racism” can be jarring to some. How can the environment be racist?

It's a term that first gained prominence in the 1970s and 80s, but as the country protests against systems of racial injustice in 2020, Civil Beat readers have asked about inequality in Hawaii. The latest episode of Civil Beat's environmental podcast has a conversation about environmental racism with a national and a local expert.

Environmental racism doesn't mean that the physical environment is racist, it's an acknowledgement that people of



color have been systemically excluded from decision making and therefore unequally protected against environmental hazards, said Devon Corcia Payne-Sturges, a [public health expert](#) with the University of Maryland who spent 12 years working for the U.S. EPA's National Center for Environmental Research.

“It’s really about those institutional rules ... government and corporate actions and decisions that deliberately target certain communities for the least desirable land uses, which would result in disproportionate exposure to toxic chemicals and hazardous waste,” she said.



Activists oppose the burying of coal ash at the PVT landfill, in part due to its proximity to the historic Native Hawaiian homestead in Nanakuli.

One prominent example of environmental racism in recent years is the clean [water crisis in Flint, Michigan](#). But it goes beyond the actions of one city.

A [recent study](#) found that Black and Hispanic Americans breathe in far more air pollution than they produce, 56% and 63% respectively, while white Americans breathe in 17% less air pollution than their actions produce.

“This is beginning to get at, you know, really what is the system that leads to these disparities? And from my perspective, I think we need to see more attention paid to that,” Payne-Sturges said.

### Disproportionate Impacts

Hawaii can understand the concept of disproportionate impacts when we look at climate change: the state’s [per-capita carbon emissions](#) are below the national average, but the Hawaiian islands are [disproportionately feeling the negative effects](#) of climate change.

However Hawaii [lacks the kind of data](#) that’s needed to draw concrete conclusions about environmental hazards and race, said Lala Nuss, [Climate Resilience and Equity Manager](#) at Honolulu’s Office of Climate Change, Sustainability and Resiliency.

“What I’ve uncovered in the nine months of my position is that there is a lot of data gaps that we have not discovered yet in

understanding the landscape of environmental injustice in Hawaii,” Nuss said.

Native Hawaiians have [disproportionately high rates](#) of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma and obesity — conditions that can, in some cases, be scientifically linked to environmental hazards.

“Native Hawaiians and people of color in Hawaii have higher rates of medical issues that could be related to their environment but that information hasn’t been clearly correlated yet,” she said.

Nuss said that doesn’t mean there’s not environmental racism in Hawaii’s past, or present.





The U.S. military used the island of [Kahoolawe](#) as a bombing range for decades, with ongoing environmental and human health impacts.

“We can look to specific examples historically whether that was the military bombing of [Kahoolawe](#), or the burden towards the Waianae Coast and Ewa Plains communities having pretty much all of the industrial energy, coal, H-power plant, as well as landfills directly and put in one place,” she said. “The communities that live in those areas are predominantly Native Hawaiian or people of color.”

Climate change is further exacerbating inequality

In the podcast, Nuss said that that many Micronesians living in Hawaii are climate refugees. In addition to leaving their ancestral homes, they often face [racism in Hawaii](#) as well.

Blue-collar workers [exposed to hazardous chemicals, pesticide use](#) on plantations next to Hawaiian homesteads, [respiratory illnesses](#) in communities of color who live near airports: Nuss said are all stark examples of one group bearing the negative side effects from industries everyone uses.

“That’s really looking at negative health,

socioeconomic impacts that specific communities are having to burden in regards to environmental degradation,” she said.

The environmental justice movement in Hawaii is looking at more than just physical health impacts, said Isaac Moriwake, managing attorney at [EarthJustice's Honolulu branch](#). He said the movement is also about the cultural, spiritual and mental health impacts of land-use decisions.

“It sounds really radical, but that’s the core truth of environmental racism at the heart of society in Hawaii,” he said.

In recent years, Native Hawaiian activists have objected to the building of a telescope on [Mauna Kea](#), a [sports field in Waimanalo](#), a [wind farm in Kahuku](#) and against [diverting streams on Kauai](#).

“Look at who has the power to make these land-use decisions, look at how these decisions have historically been made in Hawaii,” Moriwake said.

“If you’re asking Hawaiians to prove the authenticity of their own culture and trying to distinguish from ‘real’ traditional Hawaiian culture vs. ‘fake’ contemporary culture? That’s treating Hawaiians like a museum object,” he said. “So yeah, that’s racism.”



Protestors say building on the mountain would negatively impact the environment.

Nuss agrees that although there might not be physical health impacts directly tied to these projects, it shows that many communities of color in Hawaii don’t trust that leaders have their best interests at heart.

“That is a striking example of the distrust and disconnect with our decision making in the private and public sector” she said. “That’s where the shift has to change, in my opinion, and it’s going to be a lot of work.”

Payne-Sturges said that involving people from affected communities in decision-making is an important way to lessen negative side effects. But Nuss and Moriwake

said leaders are going to have to go beyond that to earn trust in Hawaii.

“Communities are their own experts,” Nuss said. “They know what they need, they know how to care for each other and themselves.”

“It’s something that people are realizing with the George Floyd protests,” Moriwake said. “Yes, the police officers were arrested but the protests continue because it’s about a bad system, not about bad people.”

*“Are We Doomed? And Other Burning Environmental Questions” is funded in part by grants from the Environmental Funders Group of the Hawaii Community Foundation and the Frost Family Foundation.*

## Have questions about the environment in Hawaii?

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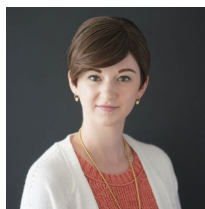
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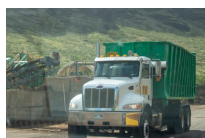
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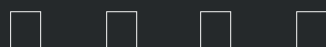
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