

http://www.manoanow.org/kaleo/opinion/hawai-i-a-vacation-conservation-destination/article_78853760-cee9-11e7-9869-f7a9f3048944.html

Hawai'i, a Vacation Conservation Destination

Shannon Noelle Rivera, Contributing Writer

Nov 21, 2017



Randy T. Bartlett / Endangered Hawaii llc □

There is no doubt that Hawai'i is a top contender as one of the world's most beautiful and unique locations. Each year, over 7 million people from around the world come to the Hawaiian Islands to enjoy the world-class climate, rich culture, incredible biodiversity and remarkable natural environment.

Unfortunately, what both tourists and locals alike do not realize is that Hawai'i's environment is quite fragile, and the beautiful island ecosystem that the world enjoys is under threat.

Fortunately, there is still time to respond to this threat on a local level, even though the federal trend is less than encouraging.

Like those on many islands, Hawai'i's endemic flora and fauna evolved for millions of years without outside threats, so, when humans arrived and introduced invasive species and diseases, the natural environment did not fare well. Native or endemic Hawaiian species have been disappearing since the 7th century CE, but the race toward extinction is speeding up as impacts from climate change and increased concentrations of invasive species stress native animals, plants and ecosystems.

At the present rate of extinction, many endemic Hawaiian species, found nowhere else on the planet, will perish within our lifetime. We have already witnessed the extinction of approximately 50 percent of all Hawaiian birds, according to World Atlas, while Division of Forestry and Wildlife reports the extinction of over 100 plant taxa

Currently, hundreds of Hawaiian species are listed as endangered. While the criteria for endangered species can include several hundred individuals, many of Hawai'i's remaining species are down to the last few individuals. The Plant Extinction Prevention Program (PEPP), focuses specifically on saving Hawaiian plant species with fewer than fifty wild individuals and there are currently over 200 species on that list.

To add to the crisis, the current support for conservation is not nearly enough to combat the accumulating challenges that we face. Globally, conservation is grossly underfunded at almost every level. In the United States, environmental and animal-rights nonprofits received 2.87 percent of charity funding, according to the Giving USA annual report for 2016, and the budgets given to government environmental agencies are not much better.

Jason Misaki of the Division of Forestry and Wildlife reported that the Department of Land and Natural Resources, the agency tasked with protecting and managing Hawai'i's natural resources, receives less than 1 percent of all federal funding. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), the agency tasked with managing federally listed endangered species, receives only 3.5 percent of the estimated budget to implement recovery plans, and that money is not evenly distributed among species, according to the results of an analysis done by the Center for Biological Diversity. This means less than 3 percent of species are going to receive proper assistance, and Hawaiian species have been historically under prioritized in ranking.

As obvious as it may seem, these budgets need to be significantly increased in order to maintain proper ecosystem function, but reality is quite the opposite. The current U.S. administration is proposing severe cuts to all environmental agencies. While environmental agencies fend off attacks to their already overextended budgets, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments reports that the administration is proposing an increase to defense spending by \$54 billion dollars, which for

reference, is more than 23 times the amount needed to implement a species recovery plan for every single endangered species in the United States!

Amidst the doom and gloom, the battle seems futile, but progress is slowly being made and conservation organizations are beginning to recognize Hawai'i's tenuous and delicate condition.

In 2016, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) hosted its quadrennial World Conservation Congress in Honolulu, Hawai'i. It was the first time in the history of the Congress that it was held in the United States. Bringing in over 10,000 conservation professionals from over 190 countries, the conference allowed more people and organizations to focus their attention on Hawai'i and our unique conservation challenges.

The Society of Conservation Biology, the largest international professional Society dedicated to the advancement of the science and practice of conserving biodiversity was one of those organizations and they initiated the formation of the Hawai'i Chapter of the Society for Conservation Biology in early 2017.

Hawai'i's Governor, David Ige, has also since become a stronger advocate for environmental issues joining the Global Island Partnership, to develop and conserve natural resources for island communities. Recently, he made Hawai'i the first U.S. state to commit to the COP 21 Paris Agreement, despite federal opposition.

Hawai'i's extinction crisis seems to be an amplified version of what the rest of the world is experiencing and, because of this, Hawai'i should be an epicenter for conservation action.

Public awareness about these serious environmental challenges is very important. Hawai'i residents and tourists must understand that these islands are more than just a vacation destination and see it as our planet's canary in the coal mine. We need to take a stand as a community to no longer allow our own individual actions or the actions of decision makers dictate the fate of our environment.

We cannot afford to wait for the next administration, or for the next environmental movement, to shift priorities – we are already out of time for many species.

It is up to this generation to turn the tides on the impending sixth mass extinction event since complex life on earth began. Hawai'i could potentially lead the way.

Contributing Writer Bio

Shannon Noelle Rivera is a graduate of University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and currently holds a position with Smart Trees Pacific and the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Kaulunani Urban Forestry Program. Shannon worked with the Society for Conservation Biology to form the Hawai'i Chapter and is the chapter's current president.

She also sits on the Society for Conservation Biology Oceania Board of Governors and is a member of Hawai'i Conservation Alliance's Nāhululehiwakuipapa Next Generation Committee, working to build capacity for the next generation of conservation leaders in Hawai'i. Interested in

collaborative conservation, her focus includes addressing animal welfare considerations and identifying gender-sensitive strategies within conservation practice.

Email: snrivera@hawaii.edu

Website: www.ShannonNRivera.com

Twitter: [@HiShannXn](https://twitter.com/HiShannXn)

Tags

Rotatingbelt

Conservation

Sustainability