

## **Naka Nathaniel: Here Are The Deeper Truths About Maui**

Our islands are interconnected and what happens to one will impact the others.

By Naka Nathaniel

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I've covered enough catastrophes, tragedies and disasters to see that we are now at the point in the story when the obvious truths are known.

Now we can start on the deeper truths about this disaster.

First, I want to refute the headline that this was Hawaii's deadliest natural disaster. This wasn't a natural disaster. This was a human-made disaster generations in the making.

The scores of deaths on Maui were not because of Hurricane Dora.

Our islands have been disrespected for centuries.

Hawaii's lands and waters have been devastated by extractive agriculture, overdevelopment and militarization.

The consequences of raising non-native crops and livestock in Hawaii have ravaged our lands and made us the planet's extinction capital.

This is an obvious truth we know: Maui was a tinderbox. The warnings were given but not heeded. The repeating instances of institutional negligence are enervating.

The warnings came not only from academics and nonprofit organizations, but they were also in the mo'olelo (stories) from our kupuna.

After all, Lahaina in Olelo Hawaii means "cruel sun."

Other mo'olelo speak of how South Maui used to be greener. The forests and vegetation on Kahoolawe would trap moisture and produce rains in the afternoon that kept South Maui from being so susceptible to drought.



The Hawaiian Islands are interconnected. The forests and vegetation on Kahoolawe would trap moisture and produce rains in the afternoon that kept South Maui from being susceptible to drought until the island was militarized. (Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2020)

Our islands are not “islands.” Our islands are interconnected. Kahoolawe kept Maui green. But Kahoolawe today is a hellscape. The clouds, rain and water table were bombed away.

The kahea to rebuild is strong, but if we don't also reforest, we are destined to exacerbate and accelerate damage to life and nature as the human-made climate crisis expands. This will not be the last wildfire.

And now, who is making the calls to rebuild, and what are their intentions?

We need to heal our islands or we are doomed to suffer more of these catastrophes. We need to plant, plant, plant before we build, build, build.

The foundation of a future rebuild must include forests and sustainable, healthy approaches to agriculture.

If we don't care first for the lands we will see more thousand-degree fires that move a mile-a-minute.

We know the truth that the dead and displaced were failed by Hawaii's physical and human infrastructure. We weren't ready or resilient.

Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke told the ugly truth: We were unprepared.

Yes, Maui's top emergency-response leaders were off-island and our governor was outside of the state, but that shouldn't have mattered. However, it did. Hawaii simply doesn't have depth in its leadership ranks.

The deeper truth about leadership here is that too many of the best and brightest have left. Like many of you, I have ohana and friends from here who have gone toe-to-toe in the biggest cities with America's most ambitious and akamai.

They've made the best choice for themselves and their families because our way of life for the past two centuries has forced the ambitious and akamai to leave.

Imported education and religious systems suppressed Hawaii's language and culture. The deeper truth is this deprived us of the knowledge of how to live here on these islands.

Two weeks ago, I wrote about how I was worried that our leadership was unprepared for the climate crises that were looming.



This area mauka of the Lahaina Bypass shows a wildfire burn area near the HECO power station. The name of Lahaina means “cruel sun” in Olelo Hawaii, a reference to drought conditions. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2023)

Last week, I wrote about the gap in the [generational transfer of knowledge](#) and how that break is being repaired. What has happened on Maui is a consequence of that break in generational knowledge.

Here’s a deeper truth: Our friends and neighbors from Silicon Valley and Hollywood have hurt Hawaii. I know this isn’t their intention (we all need help understanding Hawaii) and I know many are donating very generously to the recovery efforts. But, Hawaii is not a paradise away from their paradise. The presence of our wealthy cousins balloons the cost of living here in Hawaii, diminishes opportunity and drives the exodus of Hawaiians from their ancestral homeland.

Hawaii is not a place for a second or third home that sits empty most of the year. Or a place of retreat from the world behind gates, or on hundreds of acres purchased for personal pleasure. Hawaii is the world, under duress from unfolding climate catastrophes and inequality in too many forms.

Here’s a truth Robin Kaye from Lanai said in the third episode of Hawaii Public Radio’s must-listen series, “This Is Our Hawai’i,” about [people moving here without understanding Hawaii](#).

“We have seen too many examples of luxury homeowners and wealthy people coming in here who like the place, but either they want to change it to what they think it should be, even though they came here because they liked the way it was, or they are so dumb about cultural connections that they just don’t get it,” he said. “And if your skin is brown, you exist in a different role to them, and that can be a challenge.”

Plus, the too-big tourism industry that’s created a single-category job market and too often brings people here who further harm instead of help.

The ideal in Hawaii is that the most important five-letter word is ALOHA. However, we know that the most important five-letter word here is MONEY.

Like you, I’ve been asked repeatedly: “How are you doing?”

I’ve said that I’m shocked, saddened and sorrowful.

The deeper truth is that, like many here, I am SEETHING.

The way we’ve disrespected our land and our culture have left at least dozens dead and one of the most beautiful places on the planet devastated.

Human-made climate change, militarization and greed caused these deaths, not a hurricane hundreds of miles away.

More of us are going to die or be displaced if we don’t do what we know we need to do. That’s the deeper truth.