January 20, 2015

Urging the UH Board of Regents and the UH Foundation to Divest from Fossil Fuel Companies

Welina me ke aloha kākou,

As an associate professor and a proud alumna of the University of Hawai‘i, I add my voice to the hundreds of students, faculty, staff and other UH supporters who are calling on you to divest this institution from the fossil fuel industry. Our university should not be helping to fund climate change and the deepening inequality that is resulting from it. We have a moral imperative to act. The international community has agreed that we must collectively keep planetary warming below 2°C in hopes to avert global calamity. (A recent World Bank report states that a 1.5°C warming since pre-industrial times has already occurred.) It is unethical for the university to continue investing in fossil fuels when we know—when researchers at this very institution are producing knowledge about—how detrimental continued large-scale reliance on fossil fuels is to our social and environmental systems. As the public system of higher education in Hawai‘i, we can also think of divestment as a way to educate the broader public about the urgency of this issue.

Reports issued by countless major scientific and governmental organizations have contributed to an international consensus that burning fossil fuels leads to global warming and that climate change is causing major problems. In their 2014 report, reviewed by 1729 experts from 84 countries, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change put it plainly: “Human interference with the climate system is occurring. Climate change poses risks for human and natural systems.”1 The American Association for the Advancement of Science was more urgent: “Pushing global temperatures past certain thresholds could trigger abrupt, unpredictable and potentially irreversible changes that have massively disruptive and large-scale impacts.” The International Energy Agency has warned that if we do not get carbon emissions under control within the next few years, we will not be able to add any power plants or other infrastructure unless it is zero-carbon without exceeding the internationally agreed upon 2°C limit. And a 2012 World Bank has projected the dangers of scenarios in which global warming reaches 4°C or more, saying that such a scenario would be “devastating,” including “the inundation of coastal cities; increasing risks for food production potentially leading to higher malnutrition rates…unprecedented heat waves in many regions, especially in the tropics; substantially exacerbated water scarcity in many regions; increased frequency of high-intensity tropical cyclones; and irreversible loss of biodiversity, including coral reef systems.”2

The world’s most impoverished communities will bear the brunt of the impacts, even though they have done the least to cause climate change. The World Health Organization has documented hundreds of thousands of human deaths resulting from the extreme weather and disease related to climate change, and some estimates indicate that as many as 95% of those deaths occurred in developing nations.

Many of my faculty colleagues can better explain better ways that extreme weather and species extinction are tied to global warming; the ways the acidification of our oceans is threatening the sea life on which we depend for food; or the ways shifts in precipitation and in ground water resources are impacting access to drinkable water, a basic human right. We see these symptoms of climate change here in the islands and all over the planet.

I add my voice as a Kanaka Maoli and a professor who teaches Native Hawaiian and Indigenous politics. The University of Hawai‘i cannot achieve its goal of becoming a Hawaiian place of learning and an Indigenous serving–institution while investing in companies who extract fossil fuels and perpetuate our over-dependence on and exploitation of those resources. I want to offer three reasons why UH should divest from fossil fuel companies.

1. Investing in an industry that does tremendous environmental harm does not align with the principle of mālama ʻāina that has sustained the ʻŌiwi (Native Hawaiian people), our lands and waters for hundreds of generations. As children, many of us were taught to always leave a place cleaner than when you got there and to give back as much, if not more, than we take from any given place or resource. For instance, when you go up into the mountains, you don’t pick any fruits or flowers as you ascend; you only take what you need as you descend, once you have observed the status of the resource. We can apply this on a bigger scale. When we pass into the next realm, will we have left our islands and our earth a cleaner place than when we were born? If we continue to burn fossil fuels, the answer is a resounding “no.” In order to avoid the 2°C warming limit, fossil fuel companies need to leave in the ground a significant amount of the proven fossil fuel reserves. This means that we need to make a conscious choice not to consume those resources. Such a choice not to consume an available resource goes against the foundations of modern capitalism, but it is completely in line with Hawaiian ways of thinking about how to manage resources for the long-term, rather than just for immediate gain. Many others in Hawai‘i share this orientation to the environment.

Moreover, climate change threatens numerous significant important cultural and economic sites. I serve on the board for the non-profit, community-based organization that is restoring Keawanui fishpond on Moloka‘i. The kia‘i loko (stewards) there tell me that they are already seeing how sea-level rise and an increasing frequency of intense weather impacts the pond’s outer wall. There are so many significant sites—fishponds, taro fields, heiau—that will be impacted by continued climate change and rising seas.
2. All Hawai‘i residents are impacted by an over-dependence in fossil fuels, but I would argue that Native Hawaiians bear a particularly heavy burden. Hawai‘i has remains almost completely dependent on oil as our primary source of energy—85% of our energy usage comes from oil, and another 5% from coal. And let us not forget that crude oil and coal get to our islands on ships that are also fueled by petroleum. As a result, Hawai‘i residents pay higher energy prices, with the average retail price per kilowatt hour about twice that of the U.S. continental average as of 2009. Despite the price difference we also have a much higher oil consumption rate, measured in barrels of crude consumed per capita. We also know that energy costs on islands other than O‘ahu are generally higher, while incomes are generally lower. If we consider that electricity is a relatively fixed monthly cost for families, then we know that families with lower incomes are putting a larger proportion of their monthly earnings toward energy costs. A 2011 report on energy efficiency in low-income communities in Hawai‘i found that while moderate-income families spend about 5% of their income on energy costs, low-income families put about 15% of their earnings toward energy costs. Native Hawaiian families in Hawai‘i have the lowest mean family income of all major ethnic groups, 15.9% lower than the Hawai‘i-wide average. In the first decade of the 2000s, our per capita income is 35% lower than the Hawai‘i-wide figure. Thus, Kanaka Maoli are carrying a heavier burden in terms of energy costs vis-à-vis income. Native Hawaiians’ economic status, having the lowest income levels and rates of home-ownership in the islands, makes it more difficult (when even possible at all) to purchase and install alternative energy systems at the household level.

Furthermore, climate change is impacting the subsistence resources upon which many Hawaiian families, particularly on the neighbor islands rely for their livelihoods. For many communities in our islands, there is a very direct relationship between the health of our reefs and the food that families are able to put on their tables. Additionally, the acidification of our oceans and the death of our corals has a deeper cultural meaning to Kanaka Maoli; our cosmogonic genealogy chant known as the Kumulipo tells us that the coral polyp is our eldest ancestor.

3. Supporting the fossil fuel industry means support for more violence against Indigenous nations. As an Indigenous-serving institution and as a public university that takes seriously its place in Hawai‘i and the Pacific, the University has an obligation to confront the impacts that continued fossil fuel extraction and consumption has on Pacific Islanders and Indigenous peoples who are the experiencing increased, violent encroachment on their resources and ways of living.

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3 Simon De Stercke et al., *Energy Efficiency in Low-Income Communities on Hawai‘i Island* (New Haven: Center for Industrial Ecology, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the Kohala Center, 2011).
Perhaps you have heard of the Pacific Climate Warriors from twelve different Pacific Island nations who paddled out in hand-carved traditional canoes to confront the gigantic ships that pass through the world's largest coal port in Newcastle, Australia. These people are fighting to save their islands from being subsumed by the ocean. They were met head on by an aggressive police force on the water that was determined to let the coal ships through. Perhaps you have heard about the peaceful Mik’maq protest camp that was set up to protect their lands and drinking waters from SWN Resources Canada's proposed shale gas project in New Brunswick. Attempting to stop the illegal excavation of Mi’kmaq territory for hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, on unceded native lands, the people’s camp was raided by hundreds of Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers who were defending the company’s development. These are just two examples of the violence confronting Indigenous peoples and their territories.

If you did not hear about these conflicts, then please go and seek out the voices of Indigenous peoples who are refusing to stand for the continued extraction, exploitation and violence. Look for the video of UH alum and Marshall Islander, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, reading her poem, “Dear Matafele Peinem”—a love letter to her seven-month old child whom she refuses to let be devoured by rising seas. She shared this poem when addressing the Opening Ceremony of the UN Secretary-General's 2014 Climate Summit. Look for the 2014 Lima Declaration from the People’s Summit on Climate Change in Peru, at which Indigenous people expressed a refusal to tolerate “the biological illiteracy of those do not know how to read life.” They specifically declared that “private equity-owned transnational corporations from developed countries must be held responsible for their worldwide actions and practices” that have cause ecocide across the planet. Here in our islands, the period in which Hawai‘i has been under occupation by U.S. empire corresponds almost exactly with the time in which abundant oil and natural gas stores were exploited to literally fuel an era of intense wealth accumulation for some nations and depletion for others.

We have an opportunity now to divest from an industry that has driven such violences. There is room for hope and to be part of the solution. Divestment is one important step.

You would not be alone in taking this important action. UH could count itself in good company alongside universities such as Hampshire College, Pitzer College, the San Francisco State University Foundation, the Foothill-De Anza Community College Foundation, Humboldt State University, Chico State University, the University of Dayton, the University of Glasgow, Victoria University in Wellington, the College of the Marshall Islands, and Stanford University. UH could stand proudly alongside the World Council of Churches and the Divest-Invest Individual initiative which launched with more than 650 individuals holding investments totaling $2.6 billion. Foundations, local governments and nonprofit groups have similarly committed to divestment. For instance, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a foundation whose $860 million endowment was built on

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the Standard Oil fortune announced last fall that it intends to divest its holdings from fossil fuels and reinvest them in companies that produce renewable energy.\(^7\) Faith leaders are calling for collective action. Pope Francis has said, “On climate change, there is a clear, definitive and ineluctable ethical imperative to act.”\(^8\) Archbishop Desmond Tutu told more than 120 world leaders at the recent United Nations Climate Summit: “The destruction of the earth’s environment is the human-rights challenge of our time.” He called on world leaders to freeze further exploration for new fossil fuel sources. “Divest from fossil fuels and invest in a clean energy future,” Tutu said. “Move your money out of the problem and into solutions.”\(^9\)

Right here in our islands, we can be part of the solution by investing our human and financial resources in the further revitalization and usage of ‘Ōiwi technologies that enhance and even strengthen the natural systems, such as lo‘i kalo and loko i‘a. And we should begin thinking of technologies such as our sailing canoes that are wind-powered not as throwbacks to an ancient past, but windows to a fossil free future. There is no reason why this University should not be a leader in finding and implementing solutions to the climate change crisis. I urge you to begin by voting to freeze any new investment in fossil fuel companies and to then sell off any existing holdings in the fossil fuel industry. Future generations will thank you.

Naʻu me ka ʻo ia ʻiʻo,

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