

OPINION

Pacific Business News welcomes letters to the editor

MY VIEW

Astronomy and culture need not clash



Henk
Rogers

In a world of ever-present GPS, it's hard to imagine how early Polynesian voyagers took an incredible journey from Tahiti to the Hawaiian Islands by navigating by the stars in sailing canoes. By looking to the skies, those early travelers left the later inhabitants of these islands a long lasting legacy.

The Hawaiian community continues to benefit from this beautiful heritage. Astronomical objects have Hawaiian names, such as the supercluster "Laniakea," discovered by UH astronomer R. Brent Tully in 2014 and named to honor those Polynesian voyagers. Hawaii has built an international reputation as a modern place of discovery, bringing opportunities to our children and attracting curious people from all over the world, along with research dollars, much needed education grants, and jobs.

But if we let the Thirty Meter Telescope die on our watch, Hawaii's days as the astronomical center of the (research) universe are numbered.

Recent numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists Hawaii dead last on the list of good places to earn a living. The existing observatories provide more than 500 well-paying, clean, high-tech jobs. With TMT, we gain 140 more. More opportunities in astronomy would further diversify the economy and give local youth a chance to realize their potential without leaving family and friends to go to the mainland. What's more, a \$1.4 billion construction project provides a considerable boost to local building trade workers. Why would we turn this down?

Currently, tax revenue from the existing structures on Mauna Kea funds roads, waste management, social services and more. TMT will generate about \$26 million in observatory

operations, generating additional tax revenue to the state. But if TMT is built in Chile or India, instead of getting that new revenue, as grants and research projects follow TMT elsewhere, we'll see even some of the existing revenue leave with it. Today, astronomy's annual economic impact on Hawaii Island exceeds \$90 million. That's not a small part of our budget. Can we afford to lose it?

Beyond jobs and revenue, TMT will provide \$2 million for education and workforce development, as well as play a prominent role in the future of astronomy. Astronomy undergraduate programs in Hilo and Manoa, and the Manoa graduate program are some of the finest in the country. Locating this fantastic new tool in their backyard will only strengthen those programs. Research and exploration are vital, and each new discovery builds on itself. With TMT, Hawaii will maintain its leading position, creating new knowledge about the universe. Should we deny our youth this chance?

Of course, cultural practitioners have absolute priority in accessing the mountain, and that won't change. There are clear signs noting the cultural importance of Mauna Kea and asking everyone to be respectful.

But we can't make the mistake of prioritizing cultural importance to the exclusion of research and exploration, or vice versa. With its financial contribution to the management of the mountain, to our schools, and to our communities, TMT enables an even better balance between culture and science on Mauna Kea and in Hawaii.

Modern astronomers are deeply grateful to the Hawaiian people for allowing access to the precious skies over Mauna Kea. We need to embrace this new future, while holding space in their hearts for the past

Author's note: Henk Rogers is the founder and chairman of the Blue Planet Foundation.