
Hawaii: unique rainforests threatened by alien invasion

In many parts of the world, a large number of non-native species are invading forests and other ecosystems, leading to dramatic changes in their floristic composition and related impacts on local wildlife and peoples' livelihoods. The uncontrolled spread of exotic species in natural ecosystems is known as "bioinvasion" (see WRM Bulletins 18 and 24).

This problem is particularly serious in Hawaii, which is home to some of the most unique and endangered rainforest ecosystems on planet Earth. Extreme isolation, diversity of habitat zones and a moist tropical climate have given rise to extremely high rates of endemism in these islands. Over 90% of species native to Hawaii are endemic, found here and nowhere else. On the island of Maui, many species are unique to Haleakala volcano or the west Maui mountains. Today Maui is home to 91 threatened, endangered or proposed endangered species. The continued invasion of Maui by alien (non-native) plants, animals, insects and microorganisms poses the greatest threat to the future existence of these native ecosystems.

The proposed expansion of Kahului airport in Maui now threatens the last remaining fragments of native forest ecosystems on this small Pacific island. It is feared that the internationalization of the airport will open up Maui to direct flights from all over the Pacific rim, which will increase alien species introduction on a massive scale.

Once again the motives for this "development" project are purely economic: influential groups -big landholders, the Maui Hotel Association, the Visitors Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce- are pushing for the expansion of the airport. According to local NGOs, this is a big money project that will primarily benefit those who are already making the most money on this island.

Hawaiian environmental NGOs have expressed their concern for the fate of Maui island, which, although having already lost 70% of its native forest coverage due to human alteration of the landscape and the alien invasion, is yet considered as being perhaps the only main Hawaiian island to have a true future in conservation.

Source: Guillermo Holzmann, RAN, 22/8/99.