



Hawai'i Convention Center
1801 Kalākāua Avenue, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96815
kelepona tel 808 973 2255
kelepa'i fax 808 973 2253
kahua pa'a web hawaii tourismauthority.org

David Y. Ige
Governor

John De Fries
President and Chief Executive Officer

May 11, 2021

United States Senate
Committee on Indian Affairs
U.S. Senator, Brian Schatz, Chairman
U.S. Senator, Lisa Murkowski, Vice Chair
Washington, D.C. 20510-6450

Subject: U.S. Senate Hearing Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native
Communities: Native Tourism Economies One Year Later

Aloha Mr. Chairman, Madame Vice Chair and Honorable Members of this Committee:

In the world of the Native Hawaiian, all life forms and living systems are inter-connected and inter-related; be it the earth and sky, oceans and forests, flora and fauna, our ancestors, and descendants, be it the people within our communities and/or peoples we host from around the world. We are islanders who can source our genealogical origins to the cosmos and to the molten core of Planet Earth. We are Native Hawaiian.

And, while Hawaii may be the single-most isolated land mass on our planet, we are connected to all other islands and continents by *Moananuiakea* or, the vast ocean that surrounds us. For these reasons we appreciate the opportunity presented by this committee, to look back at the affects of the past year, for lessons that will guide us forward into the next century; where future pandemics may arise, along with the daunting challenges related to climate change, sea level rise, environmental pollution, and population growth – to name a few.

Charged with the mission of managing Hawaii tourism in a sustainable manner, the Board of Directors of the Hawaii Tourism Authority adopted a new strategic plan in January 2020 (pre-pandemic) that is comprised of four pillars: 1) Natural Resources; 2) Hawaiian Culture; 3) Community; 4) Brand Marketing. Relative to the pandemic and its lingering effects, this strategic plan - with its heightened awareness and comprehensive approach, is serving as a critical foundation upon which to rebuild Hawaii's economic recovery with the tourism industry as the lead driver and a potent catalyst for economic diversification.

Additionally, we bear the responsibility of collaborating with leaders in multiple communities in resolving specific "hotspot-locations" throughout our State, where consistent overcrowding is occurring in the absence of appropriate public policy and effective management systems.

In the four years that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, an annual average of 48,682 Native Hawaiians worked in the tourism intensive industries per year, accounted for 19.8 percent of the total workers in these industries, and 36.5 percent of the Native Hawaiian workers in all the industries. The top five occupations for Native Hawaiian workers in the tourism sector were sales, transportation and material moving, food preparation and serving, office administration, and management. While the exact number of Native Hawaiians who were forced into unemployment due to the pandemic are not available; a fair estimate would be in the range of 30,000 - 35,000. Restoring employment opportunities within our visitor industry is a priority.

However, when we use the term and/or classification of “Native Hawaiian”, we are referencing a place as much as we are describing a people. During this past year of the pandemic, we were reminded of Hawaii’s distinct competitive advantage as a world-class center of learning and a place of discovery and rediscovery; with emphasis in the following fields of study:

- Earth, ocean, and atmospheric sciences
- Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices
- Renewable energy and sustainable technologies
- Conflict-resolution, civility, compassion, and peace
- Conservation, sustainability, health, and well-being
- Astronomy, geology, volcanology, forestry, and botany
- Hawaiian culture, multicultural diversity, and cross-cultural exchange

Across the spectrum of these specific disciplines, there is an array of public-private partnerships and associations at work in Hawaii; with Native Hawaiian leaders at the forefront, who are aligned with the global agenda put forth by the United Nations and other international organizations who seek a sustainable future for all of humanity.

As we look forward to the continued economic recovery and tourism’s role within it, we are working to ensure Native communities and our indigenous ways of knowing are not left behind and forgotten. We have arrived at a crossroads where we must work to ensure that Native Hawaiians are leading Hawaii’s tourism recovery and reimagination. One that is predicated on ancestral wisdom and utilizes modern technology to create a regenerative tourism model that will empower Native Hawaiians and all peoples of Hawaii to prosper and thrive.

Malama Pono,*



John De Fries
President and CEO

**Caring for and protecting the integrity. . .*