

[OUR OPINION]

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In Hawaii, forest preservation equals self-preservation

THE ISSUE

A coalition is organized to protect Hawaii's forests — and our water.

PRESERVATION of Hawaii's forest lands is transformed from tree-hugging whimsy to necessity when their connection to the islands' water supply is made evident. It is auspicious, then, that a coalition whose goal is to cultivate awareness, funding and strategies has been organized to maintain and expand forest reserves.

The Hawaii Alliance of Watershed Partnerships was announced last week on the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the state's forest reserve system. It unites public and private landowners in efforts to protect upland forests that capture rain and moisture from clouds to provide water for Hawaii.

The system was set up after livestock grazing and tree harvesting denuded thousands of acres of forests across the island chain. Even then, officials recognized that lack of watersheds jeopardized water supplies. Since that time, the state has established reserves that protect not only forests but the endangered species within.

The alliance brings together seven watershed partnerships with hopes that more will be incorporated among the 50 such cooperatives that manage 300,000 acres in the state. The alliance could strengthen the power of diverse groups to push for attention and money to support watersheds and for preventive measures against invasive plants and animals that threaten their survival.

The need for water is obvious, yet supplies are dwindling globally. Almost 1 in 5 people, or 1.3 billion, do not have access to safe drinking water, according to a recent U.N. report, while demand is growing at an unsustainable rate. An estimated two-thirds of the world's population will lack enough fresh water by 2025.

On Oahu, water consumption is estimated at 300 gallons a day while the maximum sustainable yield is about 450 gallons a day. In as little as 20 years, consumption may grow to about 435 gallons a day, leaving a balance too narrow for comfort, especially if watersheds are reduced or deteriorate.

As Suzanne Case of The Nature Conservancy of Hawaii put it, "It's a time to renew and ramp up our commitment to forest protection."