

Maui residents rail against spike in tourism during water shortage: 'Stop coming' to Hawaii

[Jessica Lipscomb](#) August 3, 2021 at 4:56 a.m. EDT



People stroll along a beach in Maui on May 31. (Ryan Siphers for The Washington Post)

While droughts have become more common in Hawaii in recent years because of climate change, the [newly imposed water restrictions](#) have led to pushback from some residents who say they are being asked to sacrifice resources while consumption from the hotel and tourism industry remains largely unchecked. As travel returns to pre-pandemic levels in Hawaii, some natives are saying they are tired of catering to visitors.

“Stop coming to Hawai‘i. They are treating us like second class citizens, literally cutting off our water to feed over-tourism,” former state lawmaker Kaniela Ing [tweeted last month](#), sharing screenshots about the water usage prohibitions. The post got more than 144,000 likes and 53,000 retweets.

Another Instagram post from Aina Momona, an environmental advocacy organization based in Maui County, blamed the water crisis on “climate change, capitalist interests, and extractive economies.”

“Our so called leaders expect residents to carry the burden and limit use of a vital resource to continue supporting visitors who are flocking [to] our shores in a pandemic,” [read the post](#), which was liked more than 13,000 times.

With a population of 167,000, Maui County is made up of four islands, two of which are serviced by the public water system. The water usage restrictions, which went into effect July 2, target the Upcountry region, an inland community on the island of Maui traditionally dominated by ranching and farming. The county has threatened to fine those who use water for nonessential purposes \$500 for each violation; under the shortage declaration, those who commit multiple offenses can have their water meters removed entirely.

County officials have pushed back against criticisms that link the water shortage to excessive tourism. At a meeting of the Board of Water Supply last month, Maui County water supply director Jeff Pearson said the system that supplies the Upcountry community with water is separate from those that service the island’s main resort areas.

“If there were zero tourists on the island, we’d still have a Stage 1 water shortage Upcountry,” Pearson said at the meeting, [according to the Maui News](#).

Roughly one month after the Upcountry water restrictions were announced, Maui County officials [on Friday](#) urged residents and businesses in South and Central Maui, which are populated by resorts, to conserve water as well. Although the advisory did not come with mandatory usage restrictions, county spokesman Brian Perry told The Washington Post it is a part of a holistic effort to conserve water across the island.

“Water department people will tell you no matter where you are in Maui County, because of the drought people should be conserving water,” he said. “And that applies across the board, whether you’re a visitor or a resident.”

Although county leaders have explained that Maui has multiple water sources at varying capacity levels, Ing — the former state lawmaker whose tweet went viral — said the Upcountry water shortage still demonstrates a structural problem.

“Who created that infrastructure?” he asked in an interview with The Post.

Over the years, Ing said government leaders have been more concerned with funding improvements for tourists than with fixing residents’ problems.

“They just don’t invest for the infrastructure the people need. On the other hand, there’s constant investment in roads going to South Maui and Central Maui,” he said. “It’s a matter of policy choices.”

Ing, a Native Hawaiian, said the frustration from locals has been mounting after the covid-19 pandemic gave residents an unprecedented break from visitors. For the first time in generations, many Hawaiians were able to experience life on their islands without tourists.

“Locals were finally able to go to the beach, and this spot where I caught my first wave and my first fish were finally available to take my kids for once,” Ing

said. "Once you get a taste of that, it's hard to let it go again."

More than a year after the first stay-at-home orders were issued in Hawaii, tourism is back in full force. More than 260,000 people [visited Maui this past June](#), compared with just 1,900 in June 2020. At a news conference earlier this summer, Maui County Mayor Michael Victorino said he had taken the unusual step of pleading with airline officials to book fewer seats on flights to Maui.

"For about more than a year, covid-19 stopped everybody from going almost everywhere. And so now Maui's become, and the state of Hawaii, the focus point for that pent-up demand," the mayor told reporters.

Walter Ritte, a longtime Native activist and executive director of Aina Momona, told The Post that many residents are pushing to restructure the Hawaiian economy so it is less dependent on tourism.

"People have gotten really good memories during the pandemic of how it used to be without the tourists," he said. "It's going to be hard to convince the community to go back."