

January 10, 2024

MEMO TO: David M. Raatz, Jr., Director, Office of Council Services

F R O M: Ellen McKinley, Legislative Analyst *EM*

SUBJECT: **ADVANCING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN HAWAI‘I CONFERENCE**
(PAF 23-021(26))

I attended the Pi‘o Summit, “[Advancing a Circular Economy in Hawai‘i](#)” conference at the Hawai‘i Convention Center in Honolulu on December 13, 2023. The conference presented ideas for moving away from extractive systems, based on the Western goal of endless growth, to sustainable, regenerative systems with minimal waste that mimic natural systems and are aligned with circular ancestral practices.

Before European contact, Hawai‘i sustained a population only a little smaller than today. Extractive approaches are resulting in devastating climate change impacts, degraded environment, invasive flora and fauna, depletion of biodiversity and natural resources, increased susceptibility to disasters, and vulnerability from shipping disruptions.

Contemporary applications of the traditional ahupua‘a system, a communal subsistence economy which values labor and land which constitute important capital (and not as a means to capital), could guide Hawaii to protect and restore sustainable ways of life, form the basis of a circular economy, and serve as a thriving model of abundance to inspire other islands.

Ancestral Circular Economy

In his keynote address, Kamanamaikalani Beamer, Professor, Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, William S. Richardson School of Law, UH Mānoa, said that the Kumulipo (Hawaiian creation chant) stressed connectivity and a systems approach, with a responsibility to mālama ‘āina. In the ahupua‘a structure, rain and water systems were deified; wai (water) was recognized as essential, and it informed and organized everything. Waiwai means wealth; the economy should flow like water and prioritize relationship-building, include balanced governance structures with empowered community, redistribute wealth and power regularly and systematically, and promote regeneration of resources.

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Aloha ‘āina values and principles are vital to driving policy decisions for innovation and promoting circularity through taking care of the land and allowing the land to care for us in return. The circular economy can solve the root causes of the climate crisis by reusing and recycling natural resources, rather than depleting them as the capitalist system has done for the last 100 years.

Examples of proposals that are circular or regenerative include green fees (reinvestment from extractive industries to funding restoration and protection), composting or generating energy from food waste; supporting food hub collectives, restoring loko i‘a (fish ponds) and wetlands by holistically addressing the entire ahupua‘a. Systems must be managed as a whole with water at the foundation and must include equity, community, and other social systems.

Globally, youth are demanding change; power dynamics and mindsets are changing. Advance a circular economy by paying living wages for ‘āina-based work and supporting entrepreneurs creating biocultural jobs and businesses such as water quality monitors, bioremediation, and restoration work.

Doughnut Economics

Featured keynote speaker Kate Raworth, Senior Associate, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University, presented her “Doughnut Economics” model that is being implemented in places worldwide. The idea is to transform economies to become regenerative and distributive to meet the needs of all people within Earth’s living planetary boundaries.

The doughnut diagrams “a compass for human prosperity.” It includes twelve social foundational needs: water, food, health, education, income and work, peace and justice, political voice, social equity, gender equality, housing, networks, and energy, and nine planetary boundaries constituting the Earth’s “ecological ceiling” that must be respected to maintain a “safe and just space for humanity:” climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, freshwater withdrawals, land conversion, biodiversity loss, air pollution, and ozone layer depletion.

Doughnut Economics is a way of thinking, rather than a set of policies, that is being put into practice by communities in different ways, such as Vienna, Austria, where a small, community-owned microgrid project is having a major impact; Amsterdam, Netherlands, where circularity is written into the city’s

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contracts; and Barcelona, Spain, where the city is embracing Doughnut Economics to transform the city.

Doughnut Economics can be implemented in myriad ways, starting by identifying local strengths, challenges, targets and indicators, questions, history and stories, experiences, sense of place, dreams, and possibilities. Kate Raworth is available to guide or work with governments, communities, and businesses organizations to design and implement this model if requested.

Circular Economy Experiences, Challenges and Best Practices

An international, professorial panel discussion moderated by Professor Beamer noted that ‘ike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge) has embedded circular values. ‘Āina Momona and He‘eia National Estuarine Research Reserve in Ko‘olaupoko, O‘ahu are examples of indigenous, community-based stewardship. The Lahaina wildfire disaster provided an opportunity to start with a clean slate and rethink before rebuilding, design for circularity, increase circular materials use, and move from American environmentalism to indigenous stewardship.

Europe is changing the way it consumes and produces products, designing for circularity by incentivizing environmentally-friendly production processes, preventing waste at the design stage, encouraging reuse where beneficial, recycling, recovering materials from landfills, and considering environmental, economic and social impacts for specific locations. People’s willingness to change their habits are key to circular economy success.

University of Hawai‘i’s Role as a Catalyst for Circular Economy

The University aspires to do indigenous work and serve as a leader working with the circular economy and bringing young people into the conversation.

“What is good for the ‘āina is good for the economy.” “Aloha ‘āina is how we save the world.”

Thank you for the opportunity to attend this conference. If you have any questions or want more information, please contact Ellen (ext. 7661).

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cc: Richelle Kawasaki, Deputy Director, Office of Council Services
Keani Rawlins-Fernandez, Chair, Efficiency Solutions and Circular Systems Committee