Message for world conservation, from Hawaii to Marseille, France

By Sam 'Ohu Gon and Manuel Mejia

Record-breaking fires, floods, drought events, more frequent and intense storms, disease, extinction, inequality. These have been the headlines of late. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirms that these will become even more commonplace and destructive in the coming decades. While people around the world are shaken by these events and at a loss on how to prevent future disasters, what they fail to see is that Nature can be a major part of the solution.

Hawaii’s bold actions to address the impacts of the climate crisis and other environmental concerns serve as an example. We were the first state in the union to sign the Paris Agreement when the U.S. pulled out; the first to announce our goals of protecting 30% of our forest watersheds and 30% of our coastal waters by 2030, utilizing 100% clean energy by 2045, and pursuing aggressive goals for biosecurity and local food production. The announcement of the Sustainable Hawaii Initiative by Gov. David Ige was made in 2016; since then, we’ve made great strides in curbing plastic waste, reducing emissions by “electrifying” government vehicle fleets and increasing renewable clean energy in homes and businesses.

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How the U.S. military can better fight this “existential threat”

By Michael Klare

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III declared global warming an existential threat to U.S. national security at a White House climate summit earlier this year. Using language normally applied to conventional adversaries like China and Russia, Austin described the climate crisis as “a profoundly destabilizing force for our world,” generating widespread havoc and bloodshed.

If we take his assessment at his word, the Department of Defense will have to mobilize its capabilities as it preparing for a major war — altering its priorities and operations and hardening its military bases against extreme climate effects.

This will prove no easy task. The Pentagon is the nation’s leading institutional consumer of fossil fuels and the single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases in the world. In 2020, for example, the U.S. armed forces were responsible for approximately 22 million metric tons in carbon dioxide emissions — more than was emitted by some entire countries, such as Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

Clearly, the U.S. cannot reduce its national greenhouse gas emissions rapidly without a sustained drive by the Pentagon to abandon carbon-based fuels in favor...
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While COVID-19 threw a wrench into this momentum by turning the world’s head to another crisis, the pandemic did bring something unexpected and wonderful to light: Those first few months of global lockdown showed us that nature can and does rebound when given a chance. Skies normally choked with smog cleared in cities around the world. Forests saw a respite from trampling on overcrowded trails. Oceans were quiet, buzzing only with sounds of marine life, not distracted by the constant cacophony of the world’s shipping lanes. Fish swam right up to the shore and turtles nested on an Oahu beach for the first time in living memory. Countless other examples abound worldwide, and natural systems emerged as an important part of pandemic recovery.

For those of us who work in conservation, this is not news. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL) have seen this kind of recovery for decades. We already know that nature is resilient if provided the opportunity. And we know that protecting our natural environment is not only good for nature, but also for humans.

Our work at TNC Hawaii and Palmyra reminds us that as we remove threats such as invasive weeds and animals, nature thrives and in turn, so do we. Our forest preserves are the source of our islands’ fresh water and are among the last strongholds for endangered forest birds. Our work with communities is helping to restore nearshore fisheries abundance and coastal health. At Palmyra Atoll, we are working to identify what enabled corals to recover from the 2015-2016 bleaching event that decimated reefs elsewhere.

At CORAL, our work with communities to reduce local stressors such as sedimentation and wastewater pollution gives reefs the best chance to adapt to the impacts of a changing climate. By preventing tons of sediment from smothering corals, restoring watersheds with native plants that keep the soil and ecosystems intact, and securing government funding to address wastewater pollution, we are actively addressing threats to coral reefs and human health.

As we emerge from the pall cast by the pandemic, we have the opportunity to reimagine our future and guide the world toward a safer, stronger planet based on the successes we’ve had.

This fall, Hawaii is sending a delegation of conservation experts, community stewards and cultural practitioners to the IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Marseille, France. Hawaii, the previous — and first U.S. — host of the congress in 2016, will pass the torch to the new host and report on the commitments made at the last gathering, which set targets for IUCN’s conservation efforts from then to now.

As part of the delegation heading to Marseille, we hope to share our success stories and brainstorm the next critical steps for marine and freshwater protection, nature-based solutions to global climate change, integrating the knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities, working with the business sector and filling the financial gap toward a biologically diverse, thriving — and sustainable — planet. As nature thrives, so do we.