



# Waste governance and ecological identity in Maui, Hawaii, USA



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## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship examining environmental governance and solid waste management (SWM) in Hawaii has demonstrated the complexities of managing refuse in a remote, ecologically sensitive archipelago. Despite decades of calls for intensive recycling, composting, incineration, and other non-landfill disposal technologies, most islands of Hawaii continue to rely on sanitary landfilling. On Maui, a minor bureaucratic scandal centered on landfill permitting triggered the formation of an ad hoc entity intended to change SWM once and for all – the Solid Waste Resources Advisory Committee (SWRAC). I mobilize scholarship on waste governance, and in particular the ‘modes of governing’ framework to interrogate the decision-making processes of the SWRAC, evaluate their outputs, and consider the reasons for their ultimately limited impact on SWM governance on Maui. Based on a close reading of SWRAC meeting minutes and documents, I identify several factors, including the lack of clear goals or targets for SWRAC activity; a flawed, consensus-oriented decision-making process; and a failure to contextualize SWM within the broader environmental and cultural terrain of Maui. Taken together, I contend that these three problem areas underline the significance of seriously incorporating and harmonizing competing conceptions of ecological identity into both the ‘modes of governing’ framework and the scholarship of environmental governance more broadly.

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“... this isn't rocket science. This is trash, not splitting atoms or anything like that.”

[Solid Waste Resource Advisory Committee Minutes, 6 March 2008]

## 1. Introduction

On 21 June 2007, the Solid Waste Resources Advisory Committee (henceforth SWRAC, or Committee) held initial meetings in Wailuku, Maui, Hawaii. The stated purpose of the Committee was to recommend to County officials a new direction for the island's solid waste management (SWM) program, which had been adrift since a landfill permitting scandal culminating in a large fine from the State of Hawaii unfolded in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> Though certainly a degree of bureaucratic error is at the heart of the permitting faux pas – in which the County began accepting waste at an expanded section of the public landfill without first securing full permission from the State (Eagar, 2006b; Loomis, 2005a) – the episode

speaks to a longer history of challenges in planning for, collecting, and disposing of the island's solid wastes.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship has examined the environmental, political, and social histories of solid waste in Hawaii (Howell, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), and demonstrated the complexities of managing refuse in a remote, ecologically sensitive archipelago. These stem fundamentally from the fact that Maui, like the other islands of Hawaii, has very limited land for siting solid waste disposal facilities. Varied and mountainous topography, hosting increasingly strained freshwater hydrologies, in conjunction with the presence of rare species' habitat (and indeed, rare ecosystems tout court; cf. Cabin, 2013) and sites of cultural and religious significance to Native Hawaiians, all further circumscribe the space available for landfills, recycling facilities, and incinerators. At the same time, acceptable sites for waste management facilities must compete with the deeper pockets of tourism, housing, and other forms of economic development.

But to characterize the problems of SWM in purely technical or scientific fashion would be inaccurate, as the problems with SWM in Hawaii have also been highly political. Sometimes, relatively comprehensive solutions have been crafted: in the City & County

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<sup>1</sup> Western spelling is used throughout this article (e.g., ‘Hawaii’) – the correct spelling in the Hawaiian language, is transliterated as ‘Hawai’i’.

<sup>2</sup> The County of Maui includes multiple islands: Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Kahoolawe. However, the issues at the heart of this project center on the main population and economic center of Maui.

of Honolulu, for example, comparatively robust civic coffers and motivation to 'solve' the problem of waste disposal among State, city, and private stakeholders, coalesced to develop in the 1980s one of the US' largest waste-to-energy incineration facilities, not only reducing Oahu's waste volumes by about 90% but also generating electric power for the island metropolis (DES, 2005; Young and DES, 2005). Yet for the 'Neighbor Islands', including Maui, outcomes in SWM have rarely been so decisive. In fact, one of the challenges facing the SWRAC was corralling the *diversity* of proposals for handling Maui's wastes. If, as the unidentified member of the Committee cited in the epigraph of this paper argues, dealing with solid waste really *isn't* that hard, then why did the SWRAC, in conjunction with their engineering consulting partner GBB, eventually develop five distinct visions for the future of SWM operations on the island, each drawing on different combinations of financing tools, collection methods, and disposal technology?

Scholarship on environmental governance (Evans, 2012) and risk (e.g., Beck, 1992, 1995) suggest that entities like SWRAC can be useful tools for establishing societal responses to environmental problems, like waste, that have perhaps been inadequately addressed by conventional forms of regulation. Yet, the SWRAC produced a muddled policy output that achieved only limited outcomes at best. Why? In a review of environmental governance literature, Evans (2012) argues that, to be most effective, entities like SWRAC should have clear goals or targets; should include a range of stakeholders in a way that acknowledges their diverse concerns; has clear rules for participation and decision-making; and offers a path for implementation of the decisions that have been reached. As this article shows, SWRAC had very few of these attributes. But to suggest only that SWRAC ought to have "done better" would offer little towards the progression of environmental governance research, and at any rate misdiagnose a more profound problem. Instead, I contend that the root cause of SWRAC's failures – and perhaps the failures of similar exercises in environmental governance elsewhere – was the inability of stakeholders to harmonize competing conceptions of Maui's ecological identity.

Thomashow proposed ecological identity as describing "how we extend our sense of self in relationship to nature; ecological identity reflects cognitive, intuitive, and affective perceptions of ecological relationships." (1995, p. 3) Though initially a philosophical exercise, Thomashow demonstrated how ecological identity is an inherently political concept: in seeing ourselves (as individuals but also communities) in relationship to nature, we are forced to trace chains of association that continually extend and illuminate the links between our personal possessions and consumptive choices with a wider (and widening) 'commons' of ecosystems, landscapes, and the natural environment as a whole. Linking scholarship on scale, ecology, and organizational psychology, Thomashow identifies how a political process based on learning "to inhabit a landscape together, how to explore the values about a place [we] have in common, and how [we] are jointly engaged in the... habits and practices of everyday life" might transform human and human-environment relationships alike (1995, p. 96). Thus choices about managing waste are not simply technical questions regarding an obscure corner of municipal infrastructure. Rather, competing visions for SWM reflect diverging answers to the question of how we relate to the environments and people around us. For example, to embrace disposal technologies like landfilling or mass-burn incineration might speak to a willingness to indiscriminately bury or destroy evidence of excess – waste – in the most efficient means possible, whereas to advocate for recycling and composting may suggest an attitude of conscientious re-use and ecological balance. Conversely, proponents of landfilling may claim that theirs is the lowest-cost solution, and thus less stressful to limited municipal budgets whose funds might be better applied

to providing social services or other forms of environmental protection (e.g., wastewater treatment or park and beach upkeep).

Little scholarship exists at the intersections of ecological identity and environmental policy and practice. While a handful of studies examine the prospects of ecological identity as a form of social capital in the context of resistance to state oppression (Healey, 2009; Ingalsbee, 1996; Molly, 2007), or as a component of sociological studies about environmental attitudes (Stets and Biga, 2003), none deploy the concept as the basis for a radical re-imagining of how environmental policy is crafted, and towards what ends. This article aims to remedy this condition, and contends that even as scholars of environmental governance demonstrate that clear, mutually agreed-upon goals are essential to the success of governance processes, finding common ground on ecological identity is equally essential for effective SWM policymaking. In making this case, the article mobilizes analysis of empirical materials from the SWRAC exercise in light of Bulkeley et al.'s (2007) 'modes of governing' framework for the analysis of environmental policy issues.

After an overview of literatures on waste governance, the article proceeds with a brief history of solid waste management in the County of Maui before directly considering the SWRAC and the outcomes it achieved. Finally, some enhancements to practices of environmental governance relating to the concept of ecological identity are offered before suggesting avenues for additional research.

## 2. Sources and methods

This article is one part of a larger project called "Hawaii Infrastructures", which has endeavored to examine SWM practices in Hawaii since the 1950s. Previous publications (Howell, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) have examined the historical origins of SWM planning in the State of Hawaii; non-decisions about incinerators on Maui; comparisons between Oahu's experiences with SWM and those of other Pacific Island territories and states; and the roles of private businesses in shaping waste and recycling governance on Maui. These projects have been empirically rooted in the analysis of different aspects and pieces of a pool of archival and media documents collected over several fieldwork sessions at libraries across Hawaii. Table 1 offers a summary of the more than 400 unique documents that have been collected over the life of the project, organized by origin. This article is unique from previous studies due to its focus on the governance process itself (not SWM or SWM outcomes *per se*) in the very recent past (specifically, an episode from approximately 2006–2009) and is based explicitly on the meeting minutes and other documents produced by the activities of the SWRAC, which previously have received only superficial attention in the context of a dissertation relating to waste-to-energy incineration (Howell, 2013).

Common to all parts of the project has been the use of discourse analysis as a 'mode of reading' source material. Discourse analysis is a critical tool aimed at interrogating the ways in which topics and problems are conceptualized and mobilized as items of concern, and is a widely accepted method in both the scholarship of environmental governance and 'political ecology' more broadly (Dalby, 1996; Evans, 2012; Hay, 2005; Roche, 2005; Waite, 2005). Specific to this article, concerned as it is with intersections between wider understandings of the Maui environment and specific processes in environmental governance, discourse analysis is an appropriate method to understand the context (sometimes described as "framing" or "meta-governance," Evans, 2012) of the SWRAC's activities. It was not possible to conduct interviews with SWRAC participants. Additional information regarding sources and methods of analysis are included later in this paper.

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