

## In the Fire-seeable Future

As your family rushes around the house, quickly gathering all of the essentials, your room glows like the brightest sun. You hear many voices shouting commands as the engines roar to life. You slam the door closed as everyone scrambles into the car, holding only a bag of necessities. As you drive away, a glistening tear stains your cheek as you watch your home, your memories, your *life*, become engulfed by a blazing monster. When Hawai'i's people think of problems that could be hazardous, their immediate responses usually include the rising sea levels, or the destruction of coral reefs, but what is commonly disregarded is the danger of wildfires to our islands. This environmental threat is not what *will* happen if we do not take action, it *is* happening right now. As a result of stronger El Niños bringing more rain during the winters, flammable vegetation is able to prosper. In addition, the dry summer days facilitate the perfect breeding ground for wild fires. People wait idly by until the next one strikes, but Clarence T.C. Ching would have proposed such action as working with non-profit organizations to possibly prevent the further destruction of our home, including the installation of fuel breaks, and helicopter dip tanks in the areas with the greatest risks; he would encourage educational programs, and the provision of enough water resources for firefighters.

When people think of wild fires, they think about the mainland United States, where acres of land are burnt annually. Many people believe that Hawai'i is not at a major risk of suffering wild fires because some studies encompass the amount of land burned, but not in relation to the total land area. Hawai'i is not the same size as California, but people cannot assume that since we are a small state, our 'āina is not greatly affected by fires.

A 2015 study, conducted by Clay Trauernicht demonstrated that between 2005 and 2011, the mean annual area burned consisted of 0.48% of Hawai'i's total land area. This was greater than the land area that was affected by wildfires across the entire United States, which was estimated to be around 0.30%. Furthermore, Trauernicht gathered the statistics, from the same time period, for the twelve western states that are fire-prone, which totalled 0.46% of the total land area.

Most brush fires cannot be prevented, but by making the community more aware of their causes, and providing ample resources, detrimental wild fires, such as the Lahaina wild fire last year that destroyed twenty-two homes, can be prevented from happening. Currently, the Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization, a non-profit organization, is working with communities to implement projects to reduce wildfire hazards, and to protect natural resources. As a part of their wildfire prevention project, they have created the Waikoloa Dryland Wildfire Safety Park, that offers hands-on experiments for visitors to learn proper landscaping techniques, and how to make modifications to ensure homes are more fire-resistant. In addition to this, their pre-fire project creates fuel breaks and installs helicopter dip tanks on Hawai'i Island. Conventional fuel breaks are strips of land where vegetation that can easily support fire are reduced, and now they are trying to implement a living fuel break. Living fuel breaks consist of growing native plants that do not fuel fire easily as a buffer between more flammable greenery and communities. The goal is to not only prevent wildfires from reaching houses, but also to increase the population of the native plants that were overrun by foreign crops. This organization, however, has only recently started expanding outreach programs to the other islands.

With grants and public support, this organization will be able to provide every island with the resources needed to protect the land from further fires and suffering. With educational programs designed for a wide range of audiences, non-profit organizations like Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization, can inform the citizens of Hawai'i, starting at a young age, how to protect their houses from an advancing brush fire. Furthermore, their work is aimed toward cultivating the land that was previously destroyed by wildfires in order to grow more of our endangered native plants. Their goals fully embody what Mr. Ching believed in, and he would endorse these solutions because these organizations intent is to protect and improve our cherished islands.

Mr. Ching not only dreamed about making Hawai'i a better place, but he was also an achiever, who actively searched for solutions to resolve problems. Hawai'i should do the same by adhering to and living by his motto: "Ask not what your community can do for you. Ask what you can do for your community." By 2069, our island home could be left with acres of land covered in ash, with families searching for shelters as replacements for the homes that they have lost; however, this will not be in Hawai'i's future if we choose to support wildfire management organizations, as they continue to create fire breaks, install helicopter dip tanks, and ensure that there is an abundance of water in areas of risk.

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