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VISIONS & VOICES

Pacific Island Regional Disaster Libraries: Creating and Preserving Resilience

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Cook Islands National Library, Avarua, Rarotonga, Cook Islands. July 27, 2023.
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Background

The concept of “Regional Disaster Libraries” outlined in this paper stems from a practice-based research concept created following the catastrophic Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai eruption and tsunami (and COVID-19 events) of 2022, and the devastating Lahaina, Maui wildfires of 2023. Originally, this concept was for alternative media outlets that could capture the stories and life experiences of survivors. However, upon deeper analysis of the “Interlocking Disasters” affecting the Pacific Islands region and beyond, this was modified to Regional Disaster Libraries—a new concept that bears a strong similarity to cultural preservation initiatives as well as

systems of Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (DMHA) and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). This has deep synergy with the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* effort to support climate resilience initiatives upheld by the thematic areas of People-Centered Development and Climate Change and Disasters.¹

The Regional Disaster Library concept proposes the creation, curation, and archiving of vital, regionally-based disaster grey literature—here meaning materials such as zines, photos, audio clips, videos, white papers, and written personal narratives not published through traditional means—in real time.

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2024, pacificislandsforum.org.

“Interlocking Disasters”

A term is proposed here called “Interlocking Disasters” to describe a synergy of multiple processes that underpin catastrophic disasters and their cascading effects. This includes climate change, zoonotic spillover and pandemics, geopolitical impacts, the underlying material conditions of late-stage neoliberal capitalism,² and phenomena such as accelerating disaster capitalism.

In the case of the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai eruption and tsunami, the presence of “Interlocking Disasters” is shown by how the eruption disrupted Tonga’s self-imposed COVID-19 isolation, and how the ultimate interface with systems of DMHA brought the virus.³ Likewise in the case of wildfires, the catastrophe involved a convergence of climate-catalyzed drought, an offshore cyclone, invasive species, and material conditions of exploitive land-use practices.⁴

A key context of “Interlocking Disasters” is that they are also covered in monetized news cycles, where stories and narratives about the disaster and its survivors rapidly fade from front pages. Framed within a context of collapsing media outlets, the rise of paywalls, social media, online disinformation, and the arrival of artificial intelligence into the Pacific Islands media landscape—within a broader global context of democratic backsliding—the ability to sustainably document accurate and non-perishable disaster-related content is increasingly challenging.⁵

Regional Disaster Libraries

It is imperative to evolve durable, long-term spaces of cultural preservation and people-centered resilience that are compatible with systems of mutual aid that evolve in Interlocking Disasters.⁶

A Regional Disaster Library is a proposed small-scale organizational structure that urgently captures, documents, curates, archives, and if necessary, creates grey literature on all aspects of Interlocking Disasters within a designated region in real time.⁷ The term “regional” is used for flexibility—large enough to collect enough data from, but small enough to enable community engagement.

Adjacent Concepts and Examples

Cultural Preservation: A recent cultural preservation project between the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme and University of the South Pacific sought to document and preserve the Na’ahai language on the Vanuatu’s Malakula Island, with methodologies including “transcrib[ing] and transl[ate] collection of audio and video recordings of stories, songs, and dialogues.”⁸ A separate initiative led by Australian institutes in partnership with community leaders in Vanuatu resulted in a 2022 effort to document the Nafsan language in Erakor, Vanuatu, which included “technical and procedural skills required to collect, manage, and work with audio and video data.” Such examples of inclusive attempts to document and ensure cultural survival have deep resonance with the Regional Disaster Library concept.

Systems of Documentation in DMHA and DRR: Documentation and community participation have deep and long-standing roots in DMHA and DRR. Within the Pacific Islands, there are a multitude of examples of community-based engagement in systems of DMHA/DRR, including the establishment of local DRR committees in the Vanuatu Community-based Climate Resilience Project, which is in progress through 2028.⁹ There have also been community-based meetings and inputs into the culturally-appropriate recovery and redevelopment of Lahaina—including the revisioning of telecommunications networks, energy infrastructure, and restoration of “cultural corridors.”¹⁰ Regional Disaster Libraries can be a partner with and watchdog of the many complex systems of DMHA and DRR.

Towards Operationalization: What Could Pacific Regional Disaster Libraries Look Like?

Physical Spaces

Using Maui Nui (Maui County) in Hawai’i as an example, there are multiple possible models of physical spaces in which a Regional Disaster Library could be operationalized:

1. Within an existing library: Libraries serve a vital function of community, interconnection, and a space of sanctuary during times of disaster. A community library such as the historic¹¹ Moloka’i public library in Kaunakakai could offer space for a Regional Disaster

² Timothy Bryar, “Towards a Left Secretariat for the Pacific,” *Counterfutures*, no. 11 (2021): 120.

³ Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), “Tonga’s Road to Recovery: Two Years Since the Eruption of Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai,” *JICA*, January 15, 2023, https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/topics/2023/20240115_01.html.

⁴ North American Invasive Species Management Association (NAISMA), “The Tragedy in Lahaina: How Invasive Grasses and Shrubs Are Fueling the Wildfire Crisis in Hawai’i,” *NAISMA*, October 10, 2023. <https://naisma.org/2023/10/10/the-tragedy-in-lahaina-how-invasive-grasses-and-shrubs-are-fueling-the-wildfire-crisis-in-hawaii%CA%BBi/>.

⁵ Damien Cave, “As Technology Distorts Information, Pacific Governments and Media Must Cooperate,” *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 5, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/as-technology-distorts-information-pacific-governments-and-media-must-cooperate/>.

⁶ Rhiannon Firth, *Disaster Anarchy Mutual Aid and Radical Action*. Pluto Press, July 2022.

⁷ UNSW Library, “Grey Literature,” *UNSW Sydney Library*. accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.library.unsw.edu.au/using-the-library/information-resources/grey-literature#:~:text=Grey%20literature%20is%20research%20that,research%20in%20certain%20subject%20areas>.

⁸ Culture in Crisis, “Initial Documentation of Naahai, a Language of Malekula, Vanuatu,” accessed December 1, 2024, <https://cultureincrisis.org/projects/initial-documentation-of-naahai-a-language-of-malekula-vanuatu>.

⁹ Green Climate Fund, “FP184: Community-Based Landscape Management for Enhanced Climate Resilience and Reduction of Deforestation in Critical Watersheds,” accessed December 1, 2024, <https://www.greenclimate.fund/project/fp184>.

¹⁰ Maui Recovers, “Lahaina,” accessed December 1, 2024, <https://www.mauirecover.org/lahaina>.

¹¹ Molokai Public Library. Historic Hawaii Foundation. March 3, 2014. accessed December 12, 2024, <https://historichawaii.org/2014/03/03/molokai-public-library/>.

Library operation to be set up—a type of offering that could conceivably strengthen the role of the library within the community.¹²

2. In a cultural center: Local and Indigenous community cultural centers offer appropriate locations where operations of a Regional Disaster Library could be co-located. The Nā 'Aikāne o Maui Cultural Center of Lahaina tragically burned in the Lahaina wildfires, and had offered meeting space, curation of Polynesian artifacts and materials, and community services. The Center's foundation has been deeply involved in wildfire response and recovery efforts.¹³

3. In an ecological center: Ecological centers, such as the Hawaiian Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary in Maui, curate cultural and ecological information and could potentially combine ideal space with public interaction.¹⁴

4. In a community resilience hub: As documented by disaster researcher Cuong Trang, the concept of "Community Resilience Hubs" includes buildings that offer local-level emergency preparedness information, meeting spaces, and logistics support—elements of which were observed in Lahaina wildfire recovery efforts.¹⁵ Designating a portion of these innovative structures for a Regional Disaster Library would be an intriguing synergy.

Staffing and Operations as a Function of Mutual Aid

Organizers of Regional Disaster Libraries could be community members with an interest or background in DMHA/DRR, library science, and/or cultural preservation. The ability to monitor and document streams of information—news, information across the radio spectrum, social media posts and videos, weather analysis—would be important. Information would be documented, curated, and archived for the region, with the public allowed to access the facility, document their observations, and analyze collected

information. This space could also be used for preparedness trainings and even serve as a tool library to support community disaster response for items ranging from two-way radios to emergency kits.

Once operationalized, Regional Disaster Libraries could interconnect with one another as "nodes" within a larger Regional Disaster Library network—sharing best practices, hosting virtual trainings, and coordinating mutual aid.

Next Steps - Towards a Proof of Concept

The next steps towards operationalizing a Regional Disaster Library would be to create a small-scale proof of concept within the Pacific Islands region. While Regional Disaster Libraries could be created as volunteer functions of mutual aid, cultural resources grants or alignment with the efforts of the Pacific Resilience Facility under the framework of the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* could also be explored.¹⁶ Identifying pilot locations and partnerships for a prototype can be done immediately as Interlocking Disasters continue to loom over the tapestry of the Pacific.

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¹² Kiyonaga, Jack. "Last of the Librarians? Let's Hope Not," The Molokai Dispatch, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://themolokaidispatch.com/last-of-the-librarians-lets-hope-not/>.

¹³ Lahaina Cultural Center | Nā 'Aikāne o Maui [Online], accessed on December 22, 2024, <https://naaikane.org/>. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, accessed December 22, 2024, <https://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/>.

¹⁵ University of Hawai'i Sea Grant College Program. (2023, October 2). Lahaina Strong: Community Resilience Hubs, accessed December 22, 2024, <https://seagrant.soest.hawaii.edu/2023/10/02/lahaina-strong-community-resilience-hubs/>

¹⁶ Pacific Resilience Facility. [Website], accessed December 22, 2024, <https://forumsec.org/pacific-resilience-facility>.