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Foundation CEO explains how philanthropists care for environment

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"Hawaii's environment faces a significant number of threats, but the greatest one, I think, is apathy," said Terry George, president and chief executive officer of the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation.

Terry George has long been interested in international and environmental issues, which explains his enthusiasm for the upcoming World Conservation Congress,

scheduled to take place in Honolulu Sept. 1-10.

George said Tuesday that among the 8,000 or so people expected to attend the prestigious quadrennial event, sponsored by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, will be international heads of state, ministers of the environment and scientific and nonprofit leaders from over 160 countries. He also hinted at a possible appearance by President Barack Obama ("a very high-ranking member of U.S. government"), though, he added, "We only know that because a lot of Secret Service members are coming."

As president and chief executive officer of the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, George has a stake in the IUCN event, since the foundation is one of 17 members of the Hawai'i Environmental Funders Group, founded in 2010, which is among funders worldwide helping to cover its costs.

In the lead-up to the event, the local donors group also just issued its first comprehensive report on Hawaii's environment, called "He Lono Moku: the State of the Hawai'i Environment," which, it says, "shares our advances in freshwater security, renewable energy, and community-based marine management — as well as where our efforts fall short."

It was released just prior to the IUCN meeting, George said, because it was seen as "an opportunity to raise public interest in Hawaii's environmental priorities and opportunities."

George joined the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation in 2003, becoming its president and CEO in 2014 upon the retirement of Mitch D'Olier. He is a graduate of Punahou School, and has bachelor and master's degrees in international relations from Stanford and Tufts universities, respectively. He put these to good use working for the Ford Foundation, first in the Philippines from 1989 to 1995, focusing on human rights and governance, then in India for a couple of years, managing its portfolios in governance and international cooperation in South Asia. In 1998 he became chief programs officer in Hawaii for the Consuelo Foundation, which aims to prevent abuse of children, women and families in Hawaii and the Philippines.

Having also earned an MBA from the University of Hawaii, in 2009, George, 58, is married to the former Julie Tashima, a teacher at Kamehameha Schools, with whom he has two young children. They live in Kaimuki.

Question: How long was it in the planning for the Hawai'i Environmental Funders Group to come out with this new report ("He Lono Moku: the State of the Hawai'i Environment")?

Answer: I think we came up with the idea for it about two years ago, when the World Conservation Congress was finally confirmed to be held in Hawaii.

Q: What will the delegates to the World Conservation Congress be talking about?

A: Well, it's the largest environmental gathering in the world. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature was set up ... as a way for governments and increasingly nongovernmental groups ... to identify what species are at risk of going extinct, to galvanize action to conserve species. More recently it's become more sophisticated and focused on how we prevent the extinction of whole ecosystems.

Q: Was it the Hawai'i Environmental Funders Group that worked to bring the Congress here?

A: We were cheerleaders of it, but all credit is due to Chipper Wichman, who runs the Kauai-based National Tropical Botanical Garden. It was really Chipper and a small team around him ... who advocated for Hawaii being selected as the first-ever U.S. host of this quadrennial meeting. ... It ended up garnering the enthusiastic support of Gov. David Ige, Gov. Neil Abercrombie before him and President Barack Obama himself, who personally wrote a letter to the IUCN supporting Hawaii's bid to host this global gathering.

Q: Are you guys funding at all the Hokule'a effort, which seems very much a part of all of this?

A: Our foundation did, indeed. We made a significant grant, as have many other foundations and donors, for its worldwide voyage. That voyage, too, has been a wonderful organizing opportunity for galvanizing commitment to doing a better job here at home of taking care of our oceans. ... So all these things together are bright spots and ways to focus and increase our attention to our natural world here in Hawaii.

Q: Did you have a role in starting the Hawai'i Environmental Funders Group?

A: Yes, I did. Several foundations and trusts had already been informally collaborating with each other, but we realized that not enough of us were putting a high priority to environmental grant-making. So we came together as a group in 2010 with basically three goals in mind:

One was to learn from each other about what works, how you can have a greater impact.

A second was to increase the number of foundations in Hawaii working on environmental issues.

And the third was to grow the total dollar amount. I think we wanted to triple the number of foundations and double the number of dollars in a three-year period going into environment, and we blew past those goals.

So we're now 17 organizations strong — or organizations and a couple of individuals — of a wide variety of types. The Hawaii Community Foundation is kind of our secretariat, but there's everybody from us to Kamehameha Schools, and there are non-Hawaii-based foundations, such as Marisla Foundation, that funds in Hawaii.

Q: Josh Stanbro, the Hawaii Community Foundation's program director for this, was quoted as saying, "Our society is not investing enough in protecting our watersheds, forests and oceans," but how do you know how much is enough? And isn't the government supposed to be taking care of Hawaii's environment?

A: It is certainly true that we were formed because we felt like private philanthropy wasn't doing enough, and wasn't working enough together to grapple with these tough issues. So I think we've succeeded in certainly growing the number of foundations that are active now in environmental grant-making in Hawaii.

We also felt that we needed to figure out ways that we can shine a light on the desperate need of the state government for more resources for the agencies that have the greatest responsibilities that take care of our lands and our waters. That is one key purpose of the first annual report on the state of the environment in Hawaii, as you can see where we shined a light (in the study) on what the state Department of Land and Natural Resources and the state Department of Agriculture do, and identified some of their needs — in particular a larger slice of the state budget pie, with DLNR getting only 1.1 percent of the budget, even though it stewards 30 percent of the state's land and water resources, and then with the Department of Agriculture getting an even tinier slice of the pie at only 0.4 percent, despite that agriculture remains critically important for Hawaii.

Q: The report states that the mandate of the department is to "protect" Hawaii's agriculture and aquaculture industries. That sounds kind of protectionist.

A: That maybe wasn't an appropriate word to use. I think it's to help Hawaii's agriculture and aquaculture industries thrive.

We know there are some places where it's a lot cheaper to grow something than it is in Hawaii, but we have some significant comparative advantage in some items — certainly coffee and macadamia nuts.

But here's an example: I think the Department of Agriculture used to have a team of people that was able to gather and analyze data on what's going on with our 151,000 acres of crop land. That money went away, and so the department has no in-house capacity to analyze that data and make strategic decisions based on it.

Q: What kind of strategic decisions?

A: Part of it would be, if you want to support local food production, do you have enough of a sense of the trends in production of local food? ... There's a need,

therefore, for farmers to receive training and technical assistance on selection of costs, on processing and marketing, so they can make good decisions about what to grow and how to process it, to get more value for the product. Those are some of the things that a strong set of partners surrounding the Department of Agriculture and the University of Hawaii can do.

Q: The report also mentions a 2014 survey that found 68 percent of Hawaii residents agreed that “stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost,” and implied that the Environmental Funders Group is committed to that notion. But don’t stricter laws and regulations tend to stifle things?

A: Well, first, we have a set of laws on the books that need to be enforced consistently and well, and ... some of what I think we need to do is figure out how to do a better job of educating people about what those existing laws and regulations are.

There’s no question that surveys have shown there’s a high love of the environment by Hawaii’s residents — that’s not the problem. Certainly our waters and streams and forests are well loved, but they’re not always well cared for. And part of that is that our enforcement staffs are stretched so thin. They have to cover from the mountain tops to the ocean and from side to side.

But a lot comes down to values. Hawaii’s longtime kamaaina families of whatever ethnic backgrounds share the same values of respect for the aina: Take what you need, share what you have, leave some for tomorrow. So part of what I think a lot of the funders are supporting has been education to build or sustain or rebuild those values among newcomers and among new generations.

Q: The report notes how often people here do these beach cleanups, but those are people, obviously, of good conscience. Meanwhile, how many times do you ride down the street and you see somebody throw a cigarette butt outside of their car, or you go to a lookout and there’s garbage. I mean, what’s the problem here?

A: Yeah, well, Hawaii’s environment faces a significant number of threats, but the greatest one, I think, is apathy. The greatest one is the sense that you as an individual citizen cannot make a difference. The answer, I think, as our report shows, in a number of these profiles of activities, is that you can make a difference. And, actually, that not all the trend lines are bad.

Q: Yeah, I was going to ask you, are we all doomed?

A: We’re not. Absolutely not. You look, for example, on Page 5 of the report where from 2011 to 2015 the number of native forests that were actively managed for watershed protection grew from 90,000 acres to 127,000, and then got a clear goal to double it to 253,000 acres by 2030.

Q: If you look at most of these environmentally stressed areas, they're common property, so you end up with the "tragedy of the commons," whether it's fishing, the forests or popular tourist lookouts.

So you end up assessing fees, for example, to go hike Diamond Head, because you can regulate traffic a little better that way, or depress demand, but it's still in the common property realm, and thus it's all political and really hard to solve.

A: Yes. (Sighs) If these were easy problems to solve, we would have solved them a long time ago, no question about it. So it's a target-rich opportunity area for philanthropists to provide R&D money to innovate ...

Q: Within the common property framework?

A: Within the common property framework. One example is a public-private partnership in which philanthropic dollars and state dollars were used to buy a new boat for Maui's north shore and fund a dedicated team of patrolling enforcement officers who then focused on a 13-mile stretch of coastline off Wailuku, and that has resulted in a tripling of enforcement within a year and 100 percent compliance since then.

Q: Enforcing what?

A: Existing laws and regulations related to the marine resources, be it fishing or to gather other things.

Q: The report was suggesting, like it was a bad thing, that Hawaii "remains the only coastal state to not mandate saltwater fishing licensing." You mean everyone fishing in the ocean should have to have a license?

A: States that have this have been able to use the registration fee for licenses to generate dollars that go straight into managing those very resources upon which fishermen depend. So, if organized right, it can provide the kind of resources we need to make sure that everybody knows how to fish pono, fish properly. And it can provide an opportunity for us to know better what sort of fish are being caught in what particular areas, because without that scientific knowledge base it's hard to know how to manage properly. We have required catch reports for commercial fishermen, including nearshore commercial fishermen, but we don't have them for any other type of fishermen.

Q: Do they report what they catch on the mainland through these fees?

A: Oh yes. Basically, most of those licenses, when you sign up for a license, just like you do if you're a hunter here, you say by signing this that you agree to let fish and game wardens know what you've caught. So it increases our knowledge of what's being caught, and that information is critical for knowing how to manage our resources better.

What we want is to make sure there is enough coral reef health and abundance of fish so that our grandchildren can teach their grandchildren how to fish, and those of us who have been fishing or diving for 50 years as I have — I first put my face in the water off the Reef Hotel in 1966 — we know what the decline has been and it's been dramatic.

So I think many of us older folks feel a sense of urgency to make sure that we restore what we have, and we have a chance to do that.

Hawaii still has a lot going for it.

