

Hawai'i Historical Tsunami Effects (1812-2022)

INTRODUCTION

Hawai'i is one of the most unique locations in the world for studying tsunami effects. Not only are there large local tsunami sources, but Hawai'i is also in the crosshairs of tsunamis generated around the Pacific from South America to Alaska, Russia, and Japan. The NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), formerly the National Geophysical Data Center and collocated World Data Service for Geophysics (WDS) provides long-term archive, data management, and access to national and global tsunami data. The Global Historical Tsunami Database includes information on the tsunami source, maximum wave heights, and effects such as deaths and damage. The UNESCO/IOC – NOAA International Tsunami Information Center (ITIC) has worked in collaboration with the NCEI/WDS to collect post-tsunami event information since its inception in 1965. Located in Honolulu, Hawai'i, the ITIC is especially active in collecting Hawai'i tsunami event data.

HAWAII AND THE PACIFIC BASIN

The Hawaiian Islands are surrounded by the deep waters of the Pacific Basin. Nearly the entire margin of the basin, known as the Pacific Ring of Fire, is seismically active. No large land masses lie between the margin, where the Earth's tectonic plates are subducting, and the islands that form Hawai'i. Hence, the islands are vulnerable to tsunamis generated by large earthquakes occurring along the subduction zones ringing the Pacific. Hawai'i has a long history of damaging tsunamis (Fig. 1).

TSUNAMIS AFFECTING HAWAII

Examination of the NCEI/WDS Global Historical Tsunami Database reveals that the earliest historical account of a tsunami impacting the U.S. was a 16th century Hawaiian chant describing a huge wave that struck the west coast of Moloka'i. The earliest confirmed tsunami occurred on Dec. 21, 1812, when a wave generated off the Southern California coast was observed at Ho'okena on the west coast of Hawai'i Island. This was the first recorded event of a remote sourced tsunami, although tsunamis undoubtedly reached the islands prior to this. Since that time, more than 160 tsunamis (142 confirmed and 18 unconfirmed) have been observed in Hawai'i, resulting in over 2000 runup observations (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Plot of tsunami runups (locations where tsunami waves were observed by eyewitnesses, field reconnaissance surveys, tide gauges, or deep ocean sensors) from 1812 to 2015. (<http://maps.ngdc.noaa.gov/viewers/hazards/>)



DISTRIBUTION OF TSUNAMI SOURCES

Approximately 45% of the tsunamis observed in Hawai'i were from the east coast of the Pacific, including the Aleutian Islands; 47% were from the west coast of the Pacific; 7% were locally generated from Hawai'i; and less than 2% were from the Indian Ocean and Atlantic Ocean combined (Table 1). These tsunamis were caused by earthquakes (97%) and volcanic eruptions (3%).

Table 1. Tsunamis Affecting Hawai'i¹ (1812-2022)

Volcanic Eruption	Earthquake	Source Region
	18%	West Coast of South America
	15%	Kamchatka and Kuril Islands
	14%	Alaska (including Aleutian Islands)
	13%	West Coast of North and Central America
	12%	New Zealand, South Pacific Islands
	9%	New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu
	8%	Japan
	1%	Philippines
	<1%	Indonesia (Pacific Ocean)
1%	91%	Total Pacific Ocean (Remote)
1%	6%	Hawai'i
	<1%	Total Atlantic Ocean (Sandwich Islands)
	<1%	Total Indian Ocean (East Indonesia)

¹ Confirmed event validity ≥30 years

Images show damage in the Haleiwa Harbor on O'ahu from the 2011 Tohoku, Japan tsunami. 2 m runup height. Image credit: Mader Consulting Co.

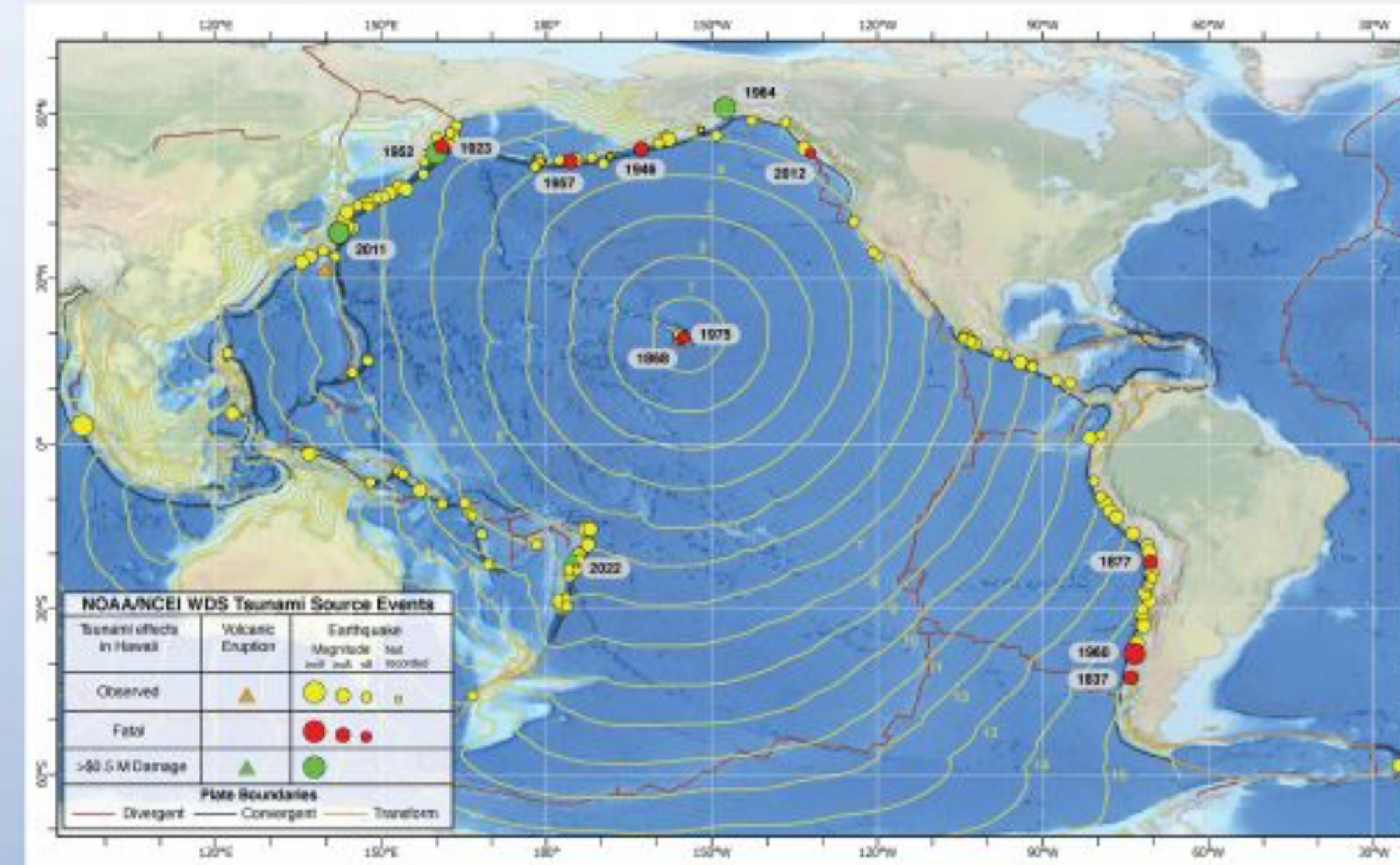


Figure 1. Plot of tsunami sources observed in Hawai'i from 1812 to 2022. The map also displays estimated pre-computed tsunami travel times from Hilo, Hawai'i to locations around the Pacific Basin. Travel times (in hours) were calculated with TTT Software (P. Wessel, Geoware) using bathymetry derived from the 2 arc-minute ETOPO2 grid.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TSUNAMIS

Hawai'i has experienced more deaths and damage from tsunamis than any other State in the U.S. Nine tsunamis caused 293 deaths and damage totaling over \$625 million (adjusted for inflation) (Table 2). 86% of all tsunami fatalities in Hawai'i have occurred on the Island of Hawai'i and Hilo alone accounts for 60% of all the tsunami fatalities in Hawai'i. Unlike the other U.S. States, the majority of these effects resulted from distant tsunami sources.

Table 2. Tsunamis Causing Deaths or >\$0.5 Million Damage in Hawai'i

Date	Location	EQ Mag ¹	TTT ² (hrs)	Runup ³ Height (m) at Location of Effects	Damage \$million ⁴ in Hawai'i	Deaths in Hawai'i	Comments
1837	South Chile	8.5	16.3	2 to 6		16	14 killed at Hilo, 2 killed at Kahului.
1868	Hawai'i	7.9	<1	2 to 14		47	47 killed on Island of Hawai'i.
1877	North Chile	8.3	14.0	3 to 5		5	5 killed at Hilo. (Additional deaths in Chile, Fiji, Japan, and Peru)
1923	Kamchatka	8.3	6.5	3 to 6	\$24.2	1	1 killed at Hilo. (Additional deaths in Russia)
1946	Unimak Is., AK	8.6	4 to 5	2 to 16	\$337.2	158	121 killed on Hawai'i (96 at Hilo), 17 Kaua'i, 14 Maui, 6 O'ahu. (Additional deaths in Alaska, Calif., Marquesas Is., and Peru)
1952	Kamchatka	9.0	6 to 7	2 to 6	\$10.4	0	Damage on Hawai'i, Kaua'i, Maui, and O'ahu. (Deaths in Russia)
1957	Andreanof Is., AK	8.6	4 to 5	2 to 16	\$49.1	2	2 indirect fatalities from airplane crash near O'ahu. Damage on Hawai'i, Kaua'i, and O'ahu.
1960	Central Chile	9.5	14.8	2 to 10.7	\$226.9	61	61 killed at Hilo. (Additional deaths in California, Chile, Japan, and Philippines)
1964	Prince William Sound, AK	9.2	5.4	2 to 3.6	\$0.6	0	Damage on Hawai'i and Maui. (Deaths in Alaska, California, and Oregon)
1975	Hawai'i	7.7	<1	2 to 7.9	\$7.5	2	2 killed at Halape.
2011	Tohoku, Japan	9.1	7 to 8	2 to 5	\$37.9	0	Damage on Hawai'i, Kaua'i, Maui and O'ahu. (Deaths in California, Indonesia, and Japan)
2012	Haida Gwaii, Canada	7.7				1	1 indirect fatality from traffic accident in the statewide evacuation on O'ahu. No damage.
2022	Tonga Islands*	Vol		≤1	\$3.4	0	Damage on Hawai'i and O'ahu. (Deaths in Tonga and Peru)

¹ Earthquake magnitudes (M_s or M_w) are instrumental (from USGS) or estimated based on intensity before 1900 (from NCEI).

² Tsunami Travel Times (TTT) are observed times taken from the NCEI database.

³ Runup height is the height of the tsunami at the point of maximum inundation above the state of the tide at the time.

⁴ Adjusted for inflation to 2021 dollars.

* Tsunami generated by volcanic eruption

To further examine the impact of tsunamis in Hawai'i, each tsunami was binned by the maximum runup height for each event from either a local or distant source. A tsunami with a runup greater than 3 m, irrespective of source distance, hits Hawai'i on average about once every ten years.

Table 3. Tsunami events affecting Hawai'i by maximum runup height per event¹ (1812 to 2022)

Local	Distant	Local	Distant	Local	Distant	Local	Distant	Local	Distant	Local	Distant	Deaths	\$M Damage
Undetermined	0.01 to 0.5 m	0.51 to 1.0 m	1.01 to 3.0 m	>3.0 m									
1	3	98	8	3	10	4	15	49	244	7	\$618		

¹ Tsunami event validity ≥30 or a confirmed tsunami.

POST TSUNAMI FIELD SURVEYS

The tsunami hazard in the islands of Hawai'i is not uniform. For example, the extensive reefs in Kane'ohe Bay on O'ahu help to reduce tsunami impact by reflecting or dissipating the waves. The shape and submarine morphology of Hilo's bayfront amplifies the incoming waves resulting in larger heights and stronger inland surges. The plots below show the distribution of tsunamis observed throughout Hawai'i following large earthquakes (<http://maps.ngdc.noaa.gov/viewers/hazards/>). Although all types of runups are displayed, the majority are from the pioneering post-tsunami field surveys conducted by D Cox, G Macdonald, and F Shepard starting in 1946, and subsequently by J Eaton, J Mink, and H Loomis. Runup maps for Kaua'i, Ni'ihau, O'ahu, Maui, Moloka'i, Lana'i, and Hawai'i islands from the 1946, 1952, 1957, 1960, 1964, and 2011 tsunamis were compiled by D Walker and G Curtis in 2002, and updated to include 2011 by ITIC in 2013.



1946 UNIMAK ISLAND, ALASKA

The tsunami waves were destructive along the shorelines of Hawai'i. 158 people were killed. Maximum wave heights were 17 m, 10 m, 11 m, and 14 m on Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, respectively.

Left: Tsunami damage near Kaihiwai Bay, Kaua'i (1946). Image credit: O. Magoon



Right: Tsunami breaking on beach house, Pala, Maui (1946). Image credit: Univ. of Hawai'i



1952 KAMCHATKA, RUSSIA

There were no deaths in Hawai'i, but the waves caused houses to collide, beached boats, destroyed piers, scoured beaches, and moved road pavement. Maximum wave heights were 4 m, 1 m, 6 m, and 3 m on Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, respectively.

Fourth wave surging inland, Kaiaka Bay, between Wailua and Haleiwa, O'ahu (1952). Image credit: R. M. Towill



1957 ANDREANOF ISLANDS, ALASKA

The tsunami knocked out bridges and flooded highways. Maximum wave heights were 10 m, 5 m, 9 m, 16 m on Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, respectively.

1960 SOUTHERN CHILE

The wave action along Hawaiian shores was quiet, except in Hilo Bay where the third wave was transformed into a bore that rushed inland along the Wailuku River. Nearly 240 hectares inland of Hilo Harbor were inundated; the 61 deaths and the majority of the damage occurred in this area. Maximum wave heights were 11 m, 5 m, 4 m, and 4.5 m on Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, respectively.

Gas station across Mo'ohaeu Park, Hilo, Hawai'i (1960). Image credit: Honolulu Star-Bulletin



1964 PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND, ALASKA

This tsunami caused minor damage in Hawai'i. Considerable damage was reported to facilities at Kahului Harbor, Maui. Maximum wave heights were 3 m, 4 m, 5 m and 3 m on Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, respectively.



2011 TOHOKU, JAPAN

Tsunami losses in Hawai'i totaled an estimated \$38 million (adjusted for inflation). The Kona Coast suffered the most with damage to restaurants, hotels, homes, and pier facilities. Boat harbors throughout the State, and homes on Maui and Moloka'i, were damaged. Maximum wave heights were 5 m on Hawai'i, O'ahu, and Kaua'i, and 2 m on Maui.