



from the bottom up *resilient local leaders regroup in kosrae*

Locals love Utwe-Walung Marine Park. Truckloads of young people stream through Utwe town on their way home from the marine park on weekend nights. Most people in Kosrae, one of the four Federated States of Micronesia, are still learning the basics of conservation, but they're experts in the arts of recreational use and chicken barbeque.

This popular marine park is located within Utwe-Walung Conservation Area (Utwe-Walung), a sprawling tapestry of reefs, lagoons, mangrove channels, and dense wetland forest on the southwest coast of Kosrae island in the northwest Pacific. From the air, Kosrae is a lonely volcanic speck in a vast green ocean, a mere 109 square kilometers in size. A coastal road runs almost all the way around the island.

Utwe-Walung features an eight-kilometer mangrove channel that runs from the marine park on the edge of urban Utwe in the east, to the small, remote village of Walung to the west. Utwe, population 1,600, vibrates to pop music at dusk. The town is a chaotic ensemble of single-story cement houses clustered tightly in a scatter pattern away from the river and the road. Cars and trucks are everywhere in various states of functionality, from the reverend's new four-wheel drive to a rusted-out economy car covered in vines.

In contrast, Walung is Kosrae's smallest village, half a day's walk from the next town. The village's 230 inhabitants have no tele-

phones and no electricity. Daily activity revolves around the tides; anyone who wants to leave by boat has to wait for high water.

Both communities completely shut down on Sunday, along with the rest of Kosrae. The church is powerful and prohibits the use of liquor, tobacco, betel nut, and kava. It's not unheard of, however, for young men wearing backwards baseball hats to toss back a few beers by the side of the dirt part of the coastal road still under construction from Utwe to Walung, through the conservation area.

utwe-walung conservation area

The conservation area extends from the fringe reef inland, up the hillside, and it runs up the coast for 11 kilometers. It includes government-owned and privately owned land, 90 percent of which belongs to individuals in Utwe and Walung. The rest is owned by people from other parts of the island.

The wetlands forest in the conservation area, carpeted with brilliant green ferns, harbors the only remaining stand of ka trees (*terminalia carolinensis*) in the world. In the marine area, the reef hosts 145 species of corals and numerous varieties of fish. The extensive mangrove forests include six kinds of mangrove tree and patches of nypa palm, all sheltering mangrove crabs and sea horses and many other species. Because severe weather is rare, some of the trees are over 200 years old.

Opposite: Tadley Woodrow spear-fishes outside remote Walung village in Utwe-Walung Conservation Area.

Above: People all over Kosrae love the marine park inside the conservation area. On weekends, the visitor center and rental huts are packed with family and class reunions, and visitors rent the project's kayaks to paddle in the lagoon.



the marvels of mangroves

Mangroves surround most of Kosrae island. Living in the transitional zone between salt and fresh water, mangroves are a buffer between the clear salt waters of the reef and the silt-laden runoff from volcanic Kosrae. The roots function as giant sieves that trap silt and prevent it from smothering coral out on the reef.

Mangroves also act as living coastal barriers against rough seas. They prevent tidal flooding and salt intrusion into neighboring areas, and they stabilize shorelines.

Mangroves provide shelter, food, and a nursery for fish and other creatures, including mullet, snapper, crabs, popol clams, and sea horses. Herons, egrets, and brown and black noddy terns nest in the treetops.

Prop roots from mangrove branches high above the water run down to the channel floor below. In addition to bringing nutrients to different parts of the tree above, these roots stabilize the tree, which grows out, not up.

The eight-kilometer mangrove channel between Utwe town and Walung village shelters mangrove crabs, popol crabs, sea horses, and other marine creatures. Birds migrate to Kosrae's mangroves from as far away as Alaska and Siberia. Historically, the channel has served as a major transportation route along the southwest side of Kosrae Island.



food, firewood, and recreation

Almost everyone in Walung and many people in Utwe still rely on the land and the sea to meet their subsistence needs. Utwe is known for its bountiful waters, and people come from all over Kosrae to fish here.

Despite the conservation area project's efforts to raise awareness, destructive fishing is an ongoing problem. People spread a lethal powder, made by grinding two vine roots together, in the mangrove waters. It kills everything it touches. However, Clorox bleach is currently upstaging the home-made powder as the poison of choice.

"We outlawed fish poisoning, but people still sneak out and do it anyway," said Singkitchy George, conservation area board member and Director of Kosrae's Department of Commerce and Industry." They don't understand why this kind of fishing is ultimately bad for them."

Mangrove overharvesting is another problem, as mangrove is the most popular wood for fires. "In Kosrae, people use firewood for ground ovens, especially for ceremonies," said Tatau Waguk, a private tour operator in Utwe who got free training through the conservation area project. "Funerals are the biggest ceremonies that we have here on the island. If you're talking about a funeral, all bets are off; people take what they need regardless of what the laws say."

From the wetland forests, Kosraeans have traditionally used the rare ka trees to build outrigger canoes, but demand has declined steadily since cars appeared on the local scene 20 years ago.

Then, there's the marine park. It's hard to find someone on the island who hasn't been there. Every weekend, the rental huts and visitor center are packed with family and class reunions. People have cookouts and rent the project's kayaks

The final quarter of the coastal road is currently under construction through the conservation area. The new conservation area board will discuss sustainable development ideas with villagers who own land along the road.

for a paddle around the lagoon. The conservation area gets the nominal proceeds from hut and kayak rentals, but few local users know that the marine park is connected to a larger conservation area.

the new coastal ring road

Meanwhile, the final section of the coastal road that will soon connect Utwe and Walung is rapidly making its way through the conservation area. Road construction is increasing erosion. Runoff and silt are filling up the mangrove channel.

Citizens are of two minds about the new road to Walung. "The road is great," said Utwe taxi driver Lee Nena. "As soon as it's paved and electricity comes in, people will start moving in right away."

"It's a plus, because in cases of emergency we can get to the hospital," said Max Salik, a private tour operator from Walung. "It's also a minus, because it's going to make it easier for other people around the island to fish here and take our resources."

"I worry about the electricity out on the road to Walung," said Madison Nena, conservation area support officer from 1995 to 2001. "Once that comes in, it's hard to predict how much development will take place in the conservation area."

the board selection process holds the project back

The conservation area project has had some troubles. "Things have kind of fallen apart since Madison stopped working as support officer a year ago," said Nena Benjamin, an Utwe resident and chair of the conservation area board.

Most of the problems stem from the fact that the communities did not select the board members when the project got off the ground in 1995. "The municipal government selected us to be on the board, and then we made the by-laws," said Nena Benjamin.

"The concept of involving the community is really good, if they are ready," said board member Singkitchy George. "That's the big issue here. The board has had friction because people aren't completely clear on why they're being asked to participate, and they are not totally committed to the project as a community activity."

"It's set up so that to be a member of the conservation area, you have to buy shares," said Reverend Nadchuo Andrew of Utwe. "One share costs ten dollars, and only people who pay are eligible to be on the board."

"The people with more shares have more say in decisions," said former support officer and current board member Madison Nena. "Many resource users can't participate, because they don't have the cash to buy shares. The people who need to be running the project are not on the board."

As a result of the board selection process, people in both communities perceive the conservation area as a government project. "Some people hate the government," said Reverend Nadchuo Andrew. "People still think the conservation area is a government program, and they don't like it because of that."

Another problem is that people aren't seeing any tangible results yet. "The marine park has been going on for five years now, and we've seen no benefits," said Hasime Taulung of Walung.

"In the beginning, we were interested in the conservation area project because of the promise of profit," said private tour operator Tatau Waguk of Utwe. "This promise attracted landowners to the conservation area concept. Unfortunately, they are still waiting for the profits to materialize."

tradition's pulse is weakening

A glance at Kosrae's history and culture puts some of the project's problems into perspective. The first visitors to stop and stay in Kosrae were whalers from America and Europe in the early 1800s. They brought whiskey, tobacco, and a wild lifestyle. They introduced diseases that spread quickly, and many people died.

The missionaries came next in 1852, discouraging Kosraeans from falling in with the whalers, but weakening their link with traditional spiritual beliefs in the process. "Before the missionaries came, we believed in the goddess Sinlaku," said Hackley Waguk, 47. "She was the goddess of nature. Anything we needed, she provided. When the missionaries came, Sinlaku and the people who wanted to stay with her left the island. That's the legend."

Then, beginning with the Germans and continuing with the Japanese and the Americans, colonial powers dismantled Kosraeans' traditional land ownership system. Formerly clan-



based, land ownership today sits with individuals who follow no standard right of inheritance.

The United States left a dominating state and national government system in place. Government employees, not chiefs or families, make decisions. “We are used to outsiders overseeing the place,” said Singkitchy George. “We are used to authority telling us what to do. This idea of having communities make decisions is new. To suddenly switch to a bottom-up approach is radical, and it’s difficult.”

Kosraeans also have a strong desire to be modern. “People go out fishing all day, only to sell their catch for cash to buy canned mackerel,” said Madison Nena. And, for the first time, people on Kosrae are urging their children to leave the island to continue school and get paying jobs in the outside world.

successes to build on

Despite the troubles, the conservation area project has had bright spots. One of the project’s assets is Madison Nena, project support officer until 2001. A steadfast and honest leader, he is not afraid to face the mistakes and chart a new course. Financial support for his job ended a year ago, but Madison has stuck with the project in an advisory capacity. “Even though I’m not the support officer anymore, I am on the board and I’m willing to facilitate the transition,” said Madison.

Madison and other conservation area board members would like to build on the project’s successful workshops — one in participatory rural appraisal and a few others in creating sustainable resource-based businesses. More than 250 people from Utwe and Walung came to the three-day participatory rural appraisal session. “People liked the activities,” said Madison. “In the workshops, they came up with their issues. They had good group discussions and got pretty involved. They talked about over-harvesting, and land filling came up a lot, too. By the end, we were all engaged.”

“At the workshop, I realized that the mangrove supply is not

During a Saturday morning working bee in Utwe, Sepe Alik (left) and Louisa Nena join other Utwe women in preparing lunch in traditional ground ovens while the men work on Utwe’s new church. Volunteer ethic is strong in Kosrae when it comes to church-related activities.

endless, and I learned a different way to cut the mangrove,” said Setsuko Nena, a Walung farmer. “Now, I try selective cutting. It is much harder work to cut this way, cutting one here, moving through the dense forest, then cutting again somewhere else, but I do it.”

The business workshops were also a success. People from Utwe and Walung who took them have started successful private, resource-based businesses. “In the second year, we started the canoe project,” said Madison. “This involved teaching young men how to build traditional outrigger canoes. An older man in Utwe who had the knowledge did the training. As the project was winding up, one of the board members saw potential in it as a money-making venture. He hired someone from Utwe to make canoes to sell and also to continue to teach village youth the skills. Some of the students from the conservation area canoe project are now learning with this guy.”

“I just finished a class for five young men, all from Utwe,” said master canoe builder Clyde Nena. “I teach them how to choose the best trees for building canoes. We look for mature trees with very straight trunks and no branches, and we cut the tree to size right there in the forest, hollowing it out a little bit to make it lighter to move. Then we do the finishing work here in my canoe-building house.”

Two small tour operations are also up and running. In Utwe, brothers Tatau and Hackley Waguk lead mangrove channel canoe tours and forest walks to an ancient religious site. In Walung, Max Salik arranges homestays and leads motorboat and walking tours. All three men took ecotourism workshops offered through the conservation area.

determined leaders find a new way forward

Another obvious asset is the conservation area itself, a sparkling gem in the northwest Pacific that local leaders recognize is worth the effort it will take to revamp the project. Core board members have come up with a new plan to reinvigorate the conservation area and get it on its way.

Everyone agrees that the first step is reorganizing the board and changing the by-laws so that resource users don’t have to buy shares in order to participate. “I’ve learned that if there is going to be a board to oversee things, then the community, not the government, should select the board,” said Madison. The

first acts of the new board will be to hire a full-time project manager and to arrange some capacity training for the board itself.

Next, new board members will review the results of the participatory rural appraisal workshop and go back to the community to discuss solutions. “The weakness before was that the board was supposed to act on the issues and ideas that came out of the participatory rural appraisal workshop,” said Madison, “but the old board got stuck.”

One topic will be ideas for resource-based businesses that go beyond ecotourism, for people on an island that gets fewer than 2,000 visitors per year. “It’s not smart to get people all revved up to work on tourism enterprises, because we just don’t get that many tourists,” said Madison.

The Utwe-Walung Conservation Area project will also renew and modify outreach and education efforts. “In our regular system, the law is enacted with an open meeting to discuss it, but few people come to these open meetings,” said Singkitchy George. “They are much more comfortable talking informally in the community, so we really do need to go to them. We need to educate people so they can make intelligent choices.”

Meanwhile, Madison has been working on a country-wide conservation effort. With others, he has created the first federal and state non-government organizations (NGOs) in the Federated States of Micronesia. The national NGO, the Micronesia Conservation Trust, recently secured US\$135,000 in grants from the Nature Conservancy and other sources to pay an executive director and set up a grants program for conservation efforts across the country. The state level NGO, the Kosrae Conservation and Safety Organization, has been working on environmental issues for two years and is looking for funding to support new work in Utwe-Walung Conservation Area. Madison is active on the board of both organizations.

“Even though people here don’t actually know yet what the purpose of the conservation area is,” said Tatau Waguk, “the important thing is, we have started the conservation area, and the marine area is protected because of it.”

“We have one single island,” said Madison Nena. “There is only one Kosrae. Once we ruin it, that’s it.”

Master carver Clyde Nena teaches young men in Utwe the traditional art of carving canoes out of ka trees.

