


navigating a new course

stories in community-based conservation in the pacific islands



TORY READ



navigating a new course

*stories in community-based conservation
in the pacific islands*

T O R Y R E A D

Author, photographer, producer: Tory Read

Editor: Anne Button

Design: Studio Signorella

Contributors: Lafcadio Cortesi, Ioane Etuale, David Grinspoon, Peter Hunnam,

Ian Karika-Wilmott, Madison Nena, Alma Ridep-Morris, Jason Salzman, Anna Tiraa,

Tom Twining-Ward, Charles Vatu

Production assistant: Sharon Bankert

Photo page 13 by Rod Hay

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNDP, SPREP, AusAID, or GEF.

©2002 by United Nations Development Programme, New York. All rights reserved.

Cover photo:

A mother and daughter harvest clams in Fagaloa Bay in Uafato Conservation Area in Samoa.

preface

— v —

introduction

— vii —

people and resources in the pacific islands

an overview

— 1 —

warrior bird, warrior people

three clans cooperate and save a species in the cook islands

— 13 —

ancestral ways, modern voices

the samoan path to conservation

— 23 —

the snake spirit and the cycad tree

two villages make peace to protect a forest in vanuatu

— 33 —

from the bottom up

resilient local leaders regroup in kosrae

— 43 —

against the odds

three states in palau collaborate to conserve a precious bay

— 53 —

looking forward

— 63 —

preface

The protection and sound management of our natural resources and biological diversity are essential components of countries' development aspirations, as well as a commitment under the global Convention on Biological Diversity. Experience has taught us that the protection of biodiversity will succeed only if it is part of an overall development strategy of poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods.

During the past decade the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) has aimed to address this particular nexus, with the intention that the people, countries, species, ecosystems, and natural environment of the Pacific would be the direct beneficiaries.

In the Pacific, conservation is first and foremost about respecting communities' rights to the lands and natural resources on which they depend. SPBCP provided support to seventeen community-based conservation areas in twelve Pacific Island countries, covering an estimated total of 1.5 million hectares of land and marine areas. Most of the conserva-

tion areas encompass the best examples of particular ecosystems in the country and include threatened or endangered species.

The SPBCP was implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), executed by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), and funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). Our organizations are committed to the protection of the natural environment and have been pleased to support the efforts towards the conservation of biodiversity in the Pacific.

It is our sincere hope that the important experiences and lessons learned from the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme, positive as well as negative, will be useful and inspirational for communities and practitioners alike in the years to come, both in the Pacific and beyond. It is in this light that we share with you here a few stories that illustrate some of the experiences of the programme.

Frank Pinto

Executive Coordinator, United Nations Development Programme/Global Environment Facility, New York, USA

Alan March

Assistant Director General, South Pacific Branch, AusAID, Canberra, Australia

Tamarii Tutangata

Director, South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, Apia, Samoa



introduction

When I took up the position of Programme Manager for South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) in 1991, I was under no illusion that it was going to be an easy task. I knew we had the technical skills within the region to establish and manage conservation areas, but I was uncertain of our ability to work effectively with the diverse people, languages, and cultures in communities throughout the twelve Pacific Island countries encompassed by the programme.

My concerns were not unfounded. My staff of three and I confronted unexpected social, cultural, and economic issues as we tried to facilitate country and community efforts to establish and manage a series of sustainable community-based conservation areas. We learned that reaching agreement in communities takes time. Historical rivalries among families within a community, as well as boundary disputes between neighbouring villages, often resulted in prolonged, tense, and difficult negotiations. We overcame these and other problems by learning new skills on the fly.

These obstacles have been mere bumps in the road in what was, overall, an enlightening and rewarding experience. Communities did resolve disputes. They created conservation areas and set up local committees to manage them. Some have successfully experimented with income-generating activities as alternatives to unsustainable resource use. One is saving a species. And others have had the strength to recognize their mistakes, go back to the drawing board, and start again.

Because there are as many ways to create conservation areas as there are communities, we hired a local full-time support officer for each conservation area project, to assist communities and liaise with government and other organizations. With the experience they gained working on SPBCP projects,

these support officers are a new breed of Pacific islander who can navigate two very different worlds— that of village issues and politics and that of government and donor requirements. They are all good managers of natural resources and of people, and they are a new asset to the Pacific.

Along with the rest of us, the support officers have learned a great deal from the communities they have worked with. I share their pride and that of community members in being part of SPBCP.

Managing the programme has opened my eyes to the multitude of social, cultural, and economic issues that are inherently linked to protecting natural resources that communities depend on for their survival. Striking a balance between meeting community needs and conserving natural resources is a challenge that we will continue to face as we find our way to integrating conservation and development.

SPBCP's focus on resource owners and users enabled the very people who are the key to successful conservation to assume responsibility for making wise resource management decisions. The experience of working with local communities, a sector that we have ignored for far too long, will be difficult to forget.

The long-term impact of SPBCP will depend on how well communities carry on without support from the programme. It will also depend on how well government and others apply the lessons learned in the SPBCP pilot projects. For community-based conservation areas to work, we must start with communities. We must all work together to build their capacity to manage and use their resources in a sustainable and profitable manner.

Joe Reti
Former Programme Manager,
South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme

Fishing nets hang at the dock in Ibobang village in Ngaremeduu Conservation Area in Palau. Many people in the Pacific Islands live off the land and the sea.



people and resources in the pacific islands

an overview

the pacific region

The Pacific Ocean is the largest geographic feature on the planet, blanketing a third of the Earth's surface. Scattered across this vast sea are more than 30,000 islands, divided into 22 countries and territories that stretch from Papua New Guinea in the west to Easter Island in the east.

The Pacific region features coral reefs, deep ocean trenches, undersea mountain ranges, and many ecosystems that are rare and unique on Earth. Islands are either the volcanic peaks of underwater mountains, or coral atolls. Land-based Pacific ecosystems tend to be small and distinctive, a result of most of the islands' tiny size. Geographic isolation has led to the evolution of numerous endemic species.

Small populations and limited natural ranges mean that plant and animal species are vulnerable in ways that species on large land masses are not. The islands are defenseless against devastating natural disasters, including cyclones and volcanic eruptions. Generating huge waves, torrential rains, and winds up to 200 kilometers per hour, a big cyclone can wipe out an entire ecosystem in a few hours. Climate change is of major concern for the smaller islands, as sea levels will inevitably rise and engulf mangroves and flood forests and farmlands.

pacific peoples

All but the furthest flung islands of the Pacific were settled by 200 B.C., by Asians, Austronesians, and Melanesians. Spanish and Dutch explorers came in the 16th and 17th centuries, followed by whalers, traders, and missionaries in the 1800s. European and American colonists arrived shortly after.

The Pacific Ocean covers a third of the Earth's surface and has more than 30,000 islands inhabited by 6 million people.

Although a few foreign-controlled territories remain, most of the Pacific Islands have now attained their independence.

Across the archipelago, traditional spiritual beliefs and practices emphasize a close connection between people and their environment. Three distinct ethnic groups inhabit the Pacific Islands: Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian, but this simple division belies the region's diversity. There are as many cultures as there are languages, and the range of languages is extraordinary. Vanuatu alone has more than 100 language groups.

For thousands of years, Pacific peoples have lived a relatively sustainable way of life. Species and habitat recovery are not new concepts to them. Many cultures traditionally applied restrictions on the use of key resources as they became scarce, then lifted these restrictions when the resource replenished. What's new are shifting community priorities and larger-scale, multi-stakeholder efforts to conserve and protect natural resources.

a mix of land ownership systems

Throughout Polynesia and Melanesia, local people own most land under centuries-old systems of customary tenure. Extended families hold title to the land, and entire communities are involved in making decisions regarding how land and resources are used. Marriages between people from different communities have been common for years. As a result, land inheritance claims quickly get confusing. The waters are further muddied when relatives working abroad come home to look for a place to settle down. Local land disputes are an animated feature of Pacific Island life. In major towns, there's almost always a queue at land court.

Although some countries in Micronesia still have customary land tenure systems in place, a combination of individual



and government land ownership is more the rule. Successive colonial administrations have eroded customary tenure on many Micronesian islands. Residents of recently independent nations frequently find themselves in court, arguing over land that their new island governments are at last attempting to return to the original owners or their descendants.

economies in transition

A subsistence economy still dominates most Pacific Island countries, but populations are growing rapidly and putting increasing pressure on forests and seas. Pacific Island populations, currently totaling 6 million people, are expected to double in the next 20 years.

Economies are in transition. Influenced by years of contact with industrialized nations, Pacific islanders want a higher standard of living. They are increasingly attracted to the idea of finding paid work in urban areas, and rural communities are slowly shifting to a cash-based life. Landowners face ever-increasing pressure to convert their natural resources into quick cash and become players in the cash economy. Island economies are fragile and depend heavily on international aid.

the greatest threat

Our own human behavior poses the greatest threat to biodiversity conservation in the Pacific region. Invasive species, introduced by visitors and locals in transit, are displacing and killing off indigenous ones. Large-scale exploitation by commercial fishing operations and foreign logging companies is destroying habitat at a rapid rate, threatening the livelihoods of subsistence and artisanal fishers and farmers. Quick-cash buyouts of community resources have led to a devastating loss of native forests in the last two decades.

Commercial logging has also caused silting in community water supplies and damaged coastal and marine ecosystems downstream, all the way to the reefs. In addition, the Pacific has experienced a large number of nuclear explosions. Although atmospheric testing stopped in 1974, underground

In the last 20 years, commercial logging operations have destroyed most native forests across the Pacific. Local landowners find quick-cash buyouts hard to resist.

testing continued until 1996. As a result of nuclear testing, several Pacific Islands are uninhabitable.

legal frameworks, institutional capacity

A lack of environmental policy and conservation legislation across the region undermines local efforts to conserve natural resources. Many countries have no protected-area legislation whatsoever. Typically, conservation areas are not legally recognized entities, and there are no mechanisms in place to back up resource management rules that communities establish.

Institutional capacity is also weak. In the early 1990s, there were fewer than 30 trained park rangers in the entire Pacific region. Government environmental departments are often tiny, consisting at times of just a single officer in charge of environmental projects for an entire country.

the national park model proved unsuitable

In the 1970s and 80s, Pacific Island governments attempted to establish national parks and nature preserves to protect areas of high biodiversity, with little success. The national park model granted recreational access, but it denied local people the right to use the resources. Throughout most of the Pacific, landowners still depend on natural resources for their livelihood, and strict protective rules denying resource use didn't work.

In many Pacific Island countries, local communities own land under customary systems, and most governments explicitly recognize and legally protect customary tenure. In these cases, governments have no choice but to cooperate with local land-owning communities to conserve biodiversity. Communities must drive decision-making about resource use, and they have to learn to balance use with conservation.

turning toward community-based conservation

At the time of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), there were no effectively protected areas in the Pacific outside of Hawaii. The Rio Summit had a significant impact on Pacific region governments and conservation groups, in terms of raising awareness about conservation and development issues.

Inspired by Rio and recognizing the shortcomings of earlier approaches, Pacific countries decided to try a different strategy.

They created the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) in 1992 to experiment with community-based conservation as an alternative to the inflexible national park model. Their aim was to conserve biodiversity while encouraging sustainable resource use.

Eligible countries proposed candidate conservation areas to the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), which managed SPBCP. An inter-governmental body based in Apia, Samoa, SPREP represents 22 nations and territories of the Pacific, plus Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States, and administers many regional environmental initiatives.

Once a project was approved, the community involved appointed a conservation area committee that was supposed to represent the viewpoints and interests of people with a stake in the resources. The programme funded a qualified national of the host country to live in the village and assist its residents as conservation area support officer. The intent was that the conservation area projects be financially self-sustaining by the end of the funding period.

spbcP conservation area pilot projects

By late 1997, 12 countries had earmarked 17 community-based conservation areas (see map, page 8), with the dual aims of conserving biodiversity and encouraging sustainable use of natural resources, with the local community landowners in the driver's seat.

SPBCP conservation areas are incredibly diverse. They range in size from 155 to 100,000 hectares and cover an array of marine and terrestrial ecosystems, including coral reefs, lagoons, bays, mangrove swamps, rivers, grasslands, and lowland, mountain, and cloud forests, as indicated in Table 1. Threats run the gamut from small-scale over-harvesting to industrial logging and commercial fishing.

As the programme progressed, experience on the ground suggested that communities needed alternative income-generating activities to help decrease their reliance on their natural resources. As a result, training in sustainable, resource-based businesses became part of the programme. After two extensions, SPBCP ended in 2001.

Alfonso Ngirngotel of Ngatpang village in Palau harvests clams from the bottom of a mangrove channel.



biodiversity conservation in the pacific today

The Pacific region has come a long way since Rio. There are now some 225 protected areas in the Pacific, including 17 community-based conservation areas supported by the programme. This is an impressive achievement, but it is only a beginning. These areas do not yet include a representative sample of all the important ecosystems in the region.

Nearly all Pacific Island countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, drafted at the Rio Earth Summit. This convention includes commitments to conserve biodiversity, support sustainable resource use, and ensure fair and equitable sharing of resource-derived benefits. Governments across the Pacific region are currently preparing national environmental management strategies, which will include strategic action plans for biodiversity conservation, as required by the convention. Community-based conservation, its profile raised through a decade of hard work via SPBCP, will surely be a component of these action plans.

What follows are stories about five different community-based conservation area pilot projects created with support from SPBCP. In the first story, three clans work together to save a bird species in the Cook Islands. In the second, a project in Samoa builds on strong existing village institutions — the council of chiefs and the church — to raise awareness about conservation. In the third story, two villages resolve a long-standing feud to protect the last remaining alluvial and limestone forest in Vanuatu. In the fourth, dedicated community leaders learn from their mistakes and make a new plan to reinvigorate their conservation area project in Kosrae, one of the four Federated States of Micronesia. In the last story, three states collaborate with communities to overcome labyrinthine jurisdictional issues and conserve an important bay in Palau.

These stories provide glimpses of community life and conservation efforts in five different Pacific Island countries, and they reveal some of the complexities and the potential triumphs of pursuing conservation from the bottom up. A final section sums up the most important messages for future conservation efforts.

Susan and John Brown Palo (right) and their children Roy, Evelyn, and Asnet plant peppers in one of their forest gardens in Vatthe Conservation Area in Vanuatu. The Palos use their gardens to meet daily needs and to make money at the market in Luganville, two hours away by truck.





***spbc* conservation area pilot projects**

- 1 Ngaremeduu CA (Palau)
- 2 Rock Islands CA (Palau)
- 3 Pohnpei CA (F.S.M.)
- 4 Utwe-Walung CA (F.S.M.)
- 5 Jaluit Atoll CA (Marshall Islands)
- 6 Arnavon CA (Solomon Islands)
- 7 Komarindi CA (Solomon Islands)
- 8 Vatthe CA (Vanuatu)
- 9 North Tarawa CA (Kiribati)
- 10 Funafuti CA (Tuvalu)
- 11 Koroyanitu CA (Fiji)
- 12 Ha'apai CA (Tonga)
- 13 Huvalu CA (Niue)
- 14 Sa'anapu-Sataoa CA (Samoa)
- 15 Uafato CA (Samoa)
- 16 Takitumu CA (Cook Islands)
- 17 Kiritimati CA (Kiribati)

spbcpr conservation area pilot projects

CONSERVATION AREA, COUNTRY	ECOSYSTEMS ENCOMPASSED	SPECIES/FEATURES OF NOTE	SIZE	LAND OWNERSHIP	HOW PEOPLE USE THE RESOURCE	THREATS TO THE RESOURCE
POLYNESIA						
Takitumu Conservation Area, Cook Islands	Mountain forest	Flycatcher	155 hectares	Customary	Not significant	Introduced ship rats
Huvalu Forest Conservation Area, Niue	Lowland rainforest	Coconut crabs, fruit bats	6,029 hectares	Customary	Coconut oil production, subsistence harvesting	Declining human population (no one to manage the CA)
Sa'anapu-Sataoa Conservation Area, Samoa	Coral reefs, lagoon, coastal swamps, mangroves	Mangroves, mangrove crabs, green turtles, mud crabs	75 hectares, no formal boundaries	Customary	Subsistence and cash harvesting	Mangrove clearing, dynamite and chemical fishing
Uafato Conservation Area, Samoa	Coral reefs, lagoon, mangroves, rivers, lowland rainforest	Ifelele tree	1,300 hectares	Customary	Tree harvesting for handicraft carving, subsistence fishing and farming	Over-harvesting of ifelele trees for carving
Ha'apai Islands Conservation Area, Tonga	Extensive coral reefs, lagoons, some wetlands, lowland rainforest	130 km barrier reef	12,100 hectares	Crown; use rights granted to individuals	Farming and fishing for subsistence and cash	Over-harvesting of marine resources, logging to create more gardens, free-ranging pigs
Funafuti Conservation Area, Tuvalu	Coral reefs, lagoons, islets, tropical broad-leafed forest	Giant clams, coconut crabs, hawksbill turtles	3,301 hectares	Mostly crown, some individually owned	Uninhabited; closed to resource use	Climate change, poaching, pollution from nearby population center
MELANESIA						
Koroyanitu Conservation Area, Fiji	Mountain and cloud forest, rivers	Peregrine falcon	3,500 hectares	Customary	Subsistence use—medicine, food, fuel, building materials	Commercial logging, mining, forest clearing for gardens, fire
Komarindi Conservation Area, Solomon Islands	Rivers, lowland forest, mountain forest	Endangered birds, butterflies	19,300 hectares, no formal boundaries	Customary	Subsistence use—medicine, food, fuel, building materials	Communities are scattered and don't work together well, ethnic tension
Arnavon Islands Conservation Area, Solomon Islands	Coral reefs, lagoons, 3 islands, mangroves, beach forest, nesting habitat	Megapodes, hawksbill turtle	8,703 hectares	Customary	Subsistence and cash fishing, megapode egg harvesting	Poaching of marine resources, ethnic tension
Vatthe Conservation Area, Vanuatu	Rivers, alluvial limestone forest	Megapodes, ifelele	3,700 hectares	Customary	Subsistence farming and fishing	Commercial logging, invasive big leaf vine, forest clearing for gardens
MICRONESIA						
Utwe-Walung Conservation Area, Kosrae, FSM	Coral reefs, lagoons, coastal swamps, mangroves, rivers, lowland forest	Mangroves, ka trees	1,850 hectares, no formal boundaries	Individual and government	Subsistence and cash fishing and farming, coastal development	Uncontrolled development on private land, destructive fishing, road construction
Pohnpei Conservation Area, Pohnpei, FSM	Coastal swamps, mangroves, rivers, palm forest, mountain forest	29 bird species, fruit bat	5,100 hectares	Government	Closed to resource use	Illegal farming, forest destruction to make kava gardens
North Tarawa Conservation Area, Kiribati	Coral reefs, lagoon, coastal swamps, mangroves	Bonefish, sea cucumbers	5,652 hectares	Customary; open access in marine area	Subsistence and cash fishing, reef gleaning	Over-harvesting by commercial fishermen from communities outside the CA
Kiritimati Conservation Area, Kiribati	Coral reefs, lagoons, scrub forest, grassland	40 seabird species, 18 nesting seabird species	52,370 hectares	Government; open access in marine area	Copra production, gardening for cash, fishing for export	Poaching of birds and eggs, cars and new causeways, introduced feral cats and ship rats
Jaluit Atoll Conservation Area, Marshall Islands	Coral reef, lagoon, islets, some mangrove	Giant clams, turtles, pearl oysters	70,100 hectares	Customary	Subsistence and cash fishing, copra production	Over-harvesting of marine resources
Rock Islands Conservation Area, Palau	Coral reefs, lagoons, limestone islands, marine lakes, lowland forest, some mangroves	Hawksbill sea turtle, Micronesian megapode, dugong, crocodile, 181 species of coral	100,035 hectares	Government	Marine tourism, research, subsistence and commercial fishing and reef gleaning	Increasing numbers of tourists, waste problems, over-harvesting of reef fish
Ngaremeduu Conservation Area, Palau	Coral reefs, lagoon, mangroves, bay, rivers, some upland forest	Dugong, crocodile, mangroves, 300 species of reef fish	12,960 hectares	Government	Subsistence and cash fishing, mangrove crab harvesting	Road construction, new development pending in uplands