



ancestral ways, modern voices

the samoan path to conservation

“Once upon a time, millions of years ago, there were no human beings or animals or trees on earth. The god Tagaloa was the supreme being, and he lived in the ninth heaven above Uafato village. Eventually, Tagaloa decided to begin his creation. He made Papa Tu (standing rock) and Papa Nofo (sitting rock). The god blessed them and said to them, “multiply.” They had a son, named Eleele (soil). Tagaloa favoured that son, and he renamed him Moa, the center of the universe. Some people in Uafato believe this is where the word Samoa comes from. Everything that lives upon Moa is Sa, or sacred, the god Tagaloa said, including animals, trees, and the land itself. All forms of violation are forbidden.”

—Ioane Etuale, support officer, Uafato Conservation Area

Just before dawn on Sunday morning in the traditional Samoan village of Uafato, young Chief Ataiti Lo’i and his family load their ground ovens with the Sunday meal they’ll enjoy later in the day. Ioane, a strong and intense man of 31 adorned with an intricate hip-to-knee tattoo, throws himself into the preparations. It’s part of his style as conservation area support officer to pitch in around the village. The Sa gong sounds as day breaks, marking the beginning of the Sabbath. Chief Lo’i turns his attention to church, dressing in a pressed white collar shirt and suit coat and a starched white lava lava (a long, wrap-around cloth) to match. A brilliant red necktie is the finishing touch.

While the women reach for demure white dresses and flamboyant woven hats, the kids head off to Sunday school. Ancient origin stories and Christianity are equally important in Uafato.

uafato conservation area

Located in a remote part of the rugged northeast coast of Upolu Island in Samoa, Uafato and its environs are in many ways a natural-born conservation area. Uafato Conservation Area is habitat to 230 humans and numerous bird species, and it includes Fagaloa Bay and approximately 1,300 hectares of forestlands. “Uafato has probably the last intact forest we will

Opposite: The foreground forest, Fagaloa Bay, and the cliffs of Tagaloa’s ninth heaven are all part of Uafato Conservation Area in Samoa. The conservation area is habitat for 230 people, two varieties of bat, and 22 bird species, including the endangered manumea, or tooth-billed pigeon.

Above: After the first of three Sunday services at Congregational Christian Church of Samoa in Uafato, women head home to change into casual clothes for the main meal of the day, prepared in ground ovens lined with hot rocks.

ever see here,” said Joe Reti, former programme manager for SPBCP. “Logging and cyclones have pretty much devastated the rest of Samoa’s forests.”

From Samoa’s capital city of Apia, reaching the village of Uafato requires two hours, a four-wheel drive vehicle, and a strong back. “The difficulty of the access has discouraged loggers,” said Joe Reti. “Their only way to get out forest products is by helicopter, and ifelele is very heavy.” The rutted road has also discouraged villagers from finding a market for the bay’s sea life.

The Uafato region is geologically one of the oldest in Samoa. Volcanic in origin, the verdant landscape cascades down steep slopes from sharp peaks, brinking at rock cliffs that drop more than 500 meters to the sea below. Uafato’s forest nurtures the country’s largest remaining stands of ifelele (*intsia bijuga*), a dark timber hardwood used by local people for carving kava bowls, war clubs, and walking staffs.

“The forest is important for the birds,” said Sina, a chief’s wife. “They find shelter and food there. It also provides us with our water supply.” The forest is inhabited by two types of bats and twenty-two bird species, including the endangered manumea, or tooth-billed pigeon. Out in Fagaloa Bay, the lagoon and the coral reefs are Uafato’s long-time fishing grounds.

traditional ways and spiritual beliefs

Ancestral ways and Christianity have both played important roles in Uafato’s conservation story. The pastor and the high chief are the two most powerful and respected men in the community. The pastor chairs the conservation area committee. The other five members are chiefs who sit on the traditional village council, headed by the high chief.

The ages-old chief system still guides and rules the village. Extended families grant chiefly titles to their men based on the merit of their deeds and actions. These chiefs represent the families on the council of chiefs, Uafato’s official decision-making body. Extended families own ancestral lands, and the

Ailoli Sosa works on a kava bowl to sell at the Apia handicraft market. Made from the root of a variety of pepper plant, kava is served on all formal occasions in Samoa. Carvers can make more money in three days of carving than they could ever make working a job in the city.





By providing fencing material to contain domestic pigs and encouraging a pandanus planting competition, the project helped the Uafato women's committee save and enhance mat and fan weaving, an established income-generating activity.

council makes all decisions regarding resource use. "Young people still respect their elders in Uafato," said Sam Sesega, Acting Coordinator for Nature Conservation at SPREP.

The church is as mighty as the council of chiefs. According to legend, in the early 19th century the goddess and prophetess Nafanua told Samoa's King Malietoa that a new religion would arrive from the sky. All the people would embrace it, she said, and good harvests and peace would follow. When missionaries docked in the king's home village a few years later, he viewed their arrival as fulfillment of the goddess's words. Malietoa accepted the missionaries, and all of Samoa followed the leader and opened its doors to Christianity. Although the missionaries asked Samoans to give up many of their old beliefs, including each individual's faith in a special spirit animal, they left the chief system intact.

Life in the village is ordered, with the church and the council of chiefs providing structure and codes of behavior. The Sa gong, an empty propane tank hanging from a tree in front of the pastor's house, rings each evening, and families pray together before dinner in their open-walled houses. During daylight hours, the Uafato women's committee runs like a Swiss clock, sweeping the village, conducting cleanliness inspections, and running a weekly bingo game, complete with prizes of rice, sugar, and canned meat.

uafato's people and livelihood

The people of Uafato are savvy, practical, and well aware of the wider world beyond the village's borders. Large families of six to 10 children are the norm, with half of all young people living elsewhere for school or work, as close as Apia and as far away as Australia and the mainland United States. The people

here are also tough. In 1991, a major cyclone blew through, damaging the reef and destroying most of the village. Rather than move to a safer, inland location, the Uafato community chose to stay and rebuild.

Despite their regular contact with Apia and beyond, men and women in the village still provide most food for their families from forest gardens and the lagoon. They also make good money selling mats and carvings to tourists and other Samoans. Women weave mats and fans from the pandanus plant, a sturdy shrub with sword-like fronds for leaves. "Pandanus goes a long way back here in the village," said Sulia, 75, who still weaves fans to sell at her daughter's Apia market stall. "For centuries, we've used it to weave clothes and mats, including fine mats for honoring people at funerals and other important occasions."

Men carve kava bowls and war clubs using ifelele. Kava, a soothing tonic made from the roots of a variety of pepper plant, is served throughout the Pacific on many formal occasions, and kava bowls are in high demand. Although carvers here have only been marketing their wares for cash for a decade or two, Uafato already has a countrywide reputation for craftsmanship and is among the largest suppliers to the handicraft market in Apia. "Carving kava bowls and selling them to tourists, it's not just about the money," said Chief Ataiti Lo'i, a master carver. "Through my carving, I can perfect something. I'm proud of my work. People from around the world have my carvings now."

a community-centered conservation area is born

After the cyclones in 1991, a group of village chiefs approached a local environmental non-government organization (NGO) to ask for assistance in managing their forests and protecting their

After feeding his chickens, Chief Ataiti Lo'i returns home from his forest garden with his grandson. He sits on both the council of chiefs and the conservation area committee.



"There is a second and more popular story in Uafato about how the name Samoa came to be. The god Tagaloa's younger brother, Lu Fasi-aitu, lived in Tutu, in the foothills of the ninth heaven, and his house had 100 living people that served as posts to hold up the roof. Each day, Lu ate one of the 100 humans for his dinner, then replaced him with another person from the village. He called these special people his Moa, or human chickens, and it was taboo, or Sa, for anyone but Lu to take them. According to legend, Lu had a red cat that guarded the human posts. Today, Uafato's cricket team is named Pusi Ula, or red cat, after Lu's cat."

—Ioane Etuale,
support officer,
Uafato Conservation Area



lagoon. Many discussions later, the chiefs decided that they wanted to put more than 14 square kilometers of their ancestral forest lands under some kind of conservation. “The term ‘conservation’ is not new to us,” said High Chief Alailefue Lisale, 69. “One purpose of the conservation area is to keep international logging companies out of Uafato, because we depend on the forest for our survival. It is a matter of common sense.” The NGO applied for SPBCP support for Uafato’s project in 1994.

Getting complete agreement throughout the village to create a conservation area wasn’t easy. “Some people were concerned that the government would take away their rights to the land, and others were skeptical about how much benefit they would receive,” said Dion Ale, the support officer for Uafato Conservation Area until 1999.

Support from local pastor Asotasi Time has helped villagers recognize and understand their conservation issues. “I try to make them believe from inside, from their inner person, that the conservation area is a blessing from God,” he said. “We must show the world that Uafato Conservation Area from the mountain to the coast is untouched land. We haven’t sold it to the highest bidder and been left with a mess on our hands. It is the original forest.”

The council of chiefs, with its established method of making decisions respected by the entire community, has also played a vital role. As just another working committee of the village council, the conservation area committee fits right in with normal business in Uafato, and the council and high chief have final say on all conservation area decisions.

challenges and growth

The conservation area project has accomplished a lot since it gained SPBCP support. Most important, people in Uafato have a deeper awareness of conservation. “Before the project started, we thought our ifelele would last forever,” said Chief Ataiti Lo’i. “Now, we see ourselves having to go farther and farther

Mao and her daughter Beata, 10, clam for dinner in the tidal pools of Fagaloa Bay in front of Uafato village. Villagers don’t harvest marine life for cash because transport to the Apia market is difficult over the bad road.

into the forest to harvest trees. We need to replace the trees we are cutting down, or our livelihood will disappear.”

Apart from conservation, the village self-identified other development issues. By addressing some of these, the conservation area committee and the NGO stumbled on a good idea for future conservation efforts: linking conservation and development. In 1998, the program supported the installation of a water system for every house in Uafato. The next year, villagers requested and received fencing materials to build enclosed pens for their domestic pigs, which were trampling pandanus plants and depriving village women of raw materials for an important income-generating activity. Women in Uafato have been selling woven pandanus mats for cash for more than two decades.

Once they solved the free-roaming pig problem, the women’s committee moved on to the second piece of the puzzle: replanting. Like everyone else in Uafato, the women love a good contest. They organized a pandanus planting competition, with support from SPBCP. For an entire month, all of Uafato’s women competed to plant the most pandanus starts. The winner came in at just over 2,000 plants and snagged a sizeable cash prize.

“Our pigs are penned and don’t ruin the gardens anymore,” said Sulia, a weaver. “We’ve been harvesting continuously ever since the planting competition, and we’ve made a lot of money because of it.”

In an effort to diversify income sources, the project has also jump-started a new resource-based income-generating venture: beekeeping. Four young untitled men from the village set up 32 hives in the forest, with assistance from a man who has a successful honey business in Apia. For a 20 percent cut, he sells Uafato honey to shops in the capital. “I decided to try beekeeping to learn new skills,” said Sam Tui, 21, one of the four men who take care of the beehives. “I also wanted a job, and my chief urged me to do it.”

The project has given Ioane Etuale, conservation area support officer since 1999, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. “I’ve had a chance to learn our culture and our traditional stories, and to talk directly to chiefs and everyone else in the community,” he said. “I’m an untitled man, and I could never do that in my own village. It’s rare for a young Samoan man to get such an opportunity. It’s a benefit that money can’t buy.”

achieving adaptive management over the long haul

The project hasn’t come without stumbling blocks. “We’ve been through some hard times trying to improve the community’s understanding of conservation, and with recognizing our own ignorance as well,” said support officer Ioane Etuale. “Looking back, we imposed our ideas from the outside before we knew what really made sense from the inside. We didn’t really acknowledge that local people had knowledge that they had gained through tradition and history.”

One required project component, the project planning document (PPD), created both opportunities and problems. “The PPD process actually began here in the community and included workshops and discussions,” said pastor Asotasi Time, conservation area committee chair. “That part was good. But something happened in the process of writing it all down. It became this very long document that was hard for us to understand. Still, it does help us interact with donors and government, because they ask for that kind of document. But here in the village, people don’t plan that way. We constantly modify our plans to meet the demands of the day.”

An unresolved threat to the future of the conservation area is the continued over-harvesting of ifelele. Most of the chiefs now recognize that the resource is finite. According to a 1997 forest inventory, slow-growing ifelele only grows on lower ridge tops and in scattered small pockets. In order for the remaining 1,000 mature trees to sustain themselves, carvers must harvest fewer than 13 trees per year. Wood carvers in Uafato are still taking between 40 and 50 trees per year without replanting.

“Carving is a main source of income in the village, and they get paid well for it, so it’s difficult to change their behavior,” said Ioane Etuale. “Also, replacing the trees is a very new idea for this community. The people who plant new ones will be long gone by the time the new trees mature. It’s new to plan so far in advance.” As tourism numbers for Samoa continue to climb, the demand for carvings will only increase. For the con-

Like other Samoans, people in Uafato love sports. Every afternoon before dusk, people young and old gather on the village green to play volleyball. Competitions with other villages are frequent.

servation area to be viable, the chiefs must address the over-harvesting of this precious timber resource, and fast.

The ending of the SPBCP grant in December 2001 left Uafato in a bit of a scramble for financing, but the village council has decided, for now, to stay the course. They have plans for a tree nursery for ifelele seedlings, and they are using income from the first two honey harvests to buy more hives for the beekeeping operation. Provided the support officer does the legwork, the chiefs also support expanding the area under conservation to lands belonging to the villages just east and west of Uafato. The conservation area committee will welcome leaders from neighboring villages on study visits to Uafato, so they can make informed decisions about putting their own lands under conservation. The support officer is writing proposals to fund these activities, and a rainforest foundation based in Germany just completed a site visit.

Sam Sesega of SPREP agrees with the chiefs that the conservation area requires paid staff. “We need to continue to have a full-time person working on this, and that would be the support officer,” he said. “Villagers move around a lot. They leave the country. They go visit relatives. They work in New Zealand or Hawaii. That’s a reality of community life in Samoa. Community-driven does not necessarily equal the community doing all of the tasks. Relying entirely on community-based volunteering is not a realistic solution.”

life goes on

In the meantime, life in Uafato goes on under the powerful leadership of the council of chiefs and the church.

It’s lunchtime on Sunday, between morning and afternoon church services, and seven chiefs who also serve as deacons take a seat on pandanus mats covering the front room floor of Pastor Time’s house. Bare-chested and sporting orange, red, and blue lava lava, the chiefs and the pastor sit cross-legged. Across the room, their wives wear brightly-colored muumuus. A sudden downpour drowns out conversation as men and women alike devote themselves to the meal: fresh fish, local chicken, coconut cream roasted in taro leaves, steamed green bananas, and hot cocoa. Young women and untitled men tip-toe in and out, serving seconds and taking away empty plates.

Appetites sated, a few men light cigarettes and conversation gets going in earnest. Bursts of laughter that shake the building punctuate the men’s long stories. In another hour, they’ll all be back in their Sunday whites, reading their Bibles and beating their pandanus fans in a hot church while the pastor delivers another sermon. Some day soon, perhaps, his sermon will urge the people of Uafato to find a solution to over-harvesting the god Tagaloa’s sacred ifelele.

