


navigating a new course

stories in community-based conservation in the pacific islands



TORY READ



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Photo page 13 by Rod Hay

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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.

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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.