

The Ecotourism Operation was a Success, But the Patient Died: A Case Study from Western Samoa

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on experience, not research, and describes the expanding ecotourism programme in Western Samoa. The authors present the pro-active approach being taken in Western Samoa to implement environmental management strategies, especially forest conservation, using ecotourism as a powerful environmental management tool. While Western Samoa lends itself to ecotourism, without responsible tourism Samoa's future development could be seriously compromised. This is the result of the current exploitation of the natural resources by the custodians of the land. These problems cannot be blamed on foreigners or tourists.

In response to a 1993 environmental assessment and management plan, the Western Samoa Visitors Bureau (WSVB) has developed a National Ecotourism Programme (NEP) to help implement such strategies. Community-based tourism enterprises are being encouraged in selected areas of high conservation value: these villages are termed eco-villages. Eco-villages are receiving an increasing share of the money generated annually from tourism. However, possibly less than one per cent of this national revenue currently reaches rural villages that are actively involved in the NEP and the National Wildlife Conservation Programme (NWCP).

INTRODUCTION

In Western Samoa, six major environmental challenges were identified in 1990, namely deforestation, loss of biodiversity, pollution, global climate change, increasing human population, and cultural erosion. Many other South Pacific Island Nations are also facing similar challenges, and within the next twenty years, the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) will have lost their primary rainforests, while their human population will have doubled to 9 million, with 43 per cent of this population living in urbanized areas. Can we all afford to be patient? It is responsible travelers who may be able to put pressure on PICs not to develop the South Pacific in an unsustainable manner.

Equitable and sustainable human development is the new development paradigm for the South Pacific, especially since previous

development efforts have altered societies, weakened cultures, and encouraged the depletion of our natural resources. Culturally-responsible tourism could play a very important role over the next twenty years. If not, we stand to lose the South Pacific as a unique unspoilt tourist destination.

With the aid of an Australian anthropologist, who specializes in the establishment of ecotourism projects for indigenous peoples in the South Pacific (WSVB 1993,1995), the NEP commenced officially in 1993. Environmental awareness is increasing on-island and ecotourism is being seen as a powerful tool to help reverse many of the major recognized environmental, and the associated biological, cultural, economic, physical, and social challenges.

Western Samoa is now well positioned to become an authentic ecotourism destination in that it has a number of specialist ecotour operators, an expanding ecotourism programme, minimal cultural erosion, scenic marvels, including over 300 volcanic craters extending to over 6000 feet, 100 miles of rainforest, easily identified environmental challenges, and excellent interpretation opportunities offered by locally-trained guides.

Visitors to Western Samoa listen to the village chiefs argue that logging their forests over the past thirty years was the best decision that they could have made at the time. Until we can devise alternate options, we are going to see the disappearance of Western Samoa's beautiful tropical rainforests and many of its wildlife inhabitants.

Ecotourists are now becoming actively involved and are supporting local wildlife conservation efforts. They are also helping finance the introduction of sustainable technology (e.g., composting toilets), and they are assisting with the implementation of small village projects, including the planting of native rainforest species and construction of rainwater tanks, at a number of ecotourism destinations. Ecotourists are finding themselves playing the role of eco-workers as they help create more environmental awareness and help fund small village projects.

There are several ways ecotourists can experience Western Samoa. They can interact with villagers for US\$115 per person per day all inclusive, they can chose to stay overnight in the more familiar eco-resorts for US \$205 per person per day, they can choose to join an Eco-researcher /Eco-worker programme (Appendix 1) for three weeks or more at the Rainforest Ecolodge in Apia for US \$45 per day including bed and breakfast, or they can stay within an eco-village for US \$25 per person per day including all meals and accommodations.

Alternatively, ecotourists can purchase a sixty page guidebook, *Ecotouring in Western Samoa* (Sooaemalelagi and Brown 1995), which describes the National Ecotourism Programme and mentions

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where the eco-villages are and where to contact ecotour guides in these villages.

The way the NEP has been designed, visitors to Western Samoa are guided to selected eco-villages in a controlled manner. Guides at these destinations are being continually trained to meet the requirements of visitors and to help enhance this cross-cultural experience.

Until the revenue from tourism increases, or from any other source, rural villagers will be left with no alternative but to over-exploit their limited and vulnerable natural resources, especially their forests. The impact of this over-exploitation on Samoa's future tourism industry needs to be assessed. In the meantime, an environmental audit of the tourism industry has been proposed for this year and assistance from ecotourism planners has been sought.

The NEP is primarily community-based. A number of villages have now established customary-owned rainforest preserves and are accommodating ecotourists, building nature trails, and offering interpretation facilities. Protection of mangrove forests is also a feature of the NEP. Reforestation projects are being conducted at a national governmental level as well as at the local village level. Eco-travelers can participate in this reforestation programme.

Also, Eco-Tour Samoa Ltd., a privately operated ecotour company and environmental consulting agency, operates ecotours from the Rainforest Ecolodge. This ecolodge acts as a center for ecotourism research, involving the planting of fruit trees, native forest trees as well as trees for timber production for traditional house construction. Attracting native wildlife onto this 150 acre site is one further objective, as is producing medicinal plants that are not now readily available to many villagers.

Ecotourists are also invited to join an eco-worker programme at the Rainforest Ecolodge where sustainable technologies are applied to rural settings. They can participate in an informal environmental awareness programme as they tour to selected ecotourism destinations on Savaii, Manono and Upolu islands, traveling in a locally-built island-style ecotour bus, professionally guided by the managers of the rainforest Ecolodge and Eco-Tour Samoa.

The NEP receives considerable input from Pacific Islands. Without the following reference material, the NEP would not be where it is today:

Ecotourism: A Business Planning Guide (Bushnell 1994)

Pacific Islands Ecotourism: A Public Policy and Planning Guide
(Liu 1994)

Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry—Towards Environmentally Sustainable Development (World Travel and Tourism Council 1995)

Eco-researchers are invited to use the Rainforest Ecolodge as a base, help develop it into an ecotourism/ environmental resource center, and participate in the NEP (National Ecotourism Program).

State of the Environment Report (Department of Lands, Survey and Environment 1993)

National Environmental Management Strategy (Department of Lands, Survey and Environment 1993).

NATIONAL ECOTOURISM PROGRAMME (NEP)

Ecotourists are currently helping to alleviate non-sustainable forestry practices in Western Samoa simply by staying overnight in selected rainforest preserves. Unknowingly, the cultural integrity of Samoans can be enhanced by these visits if certain principles of ecotourism are followed. The ecotourism guidelines that are currently in place ensure that minimal negative impact from ecotourism programmes occurs. The following discussion describes (i) features of the NEP, (ii) how ecotourism is addressing the identified environmental challenges, (iii) different roles that ecotourists can play in Western Samoa, (iv) the case in Western Samoa and (v) incentives for eco-researchers to visit Samoa and assist with the NEP.

FEATURES OF THE NATIONAL ECOTOURISM PROGRAMME

The NEP recognizes the importance of tourism to Samoa's development and it also recognizes the role that ecotourists can play in helping to correct some of the existing non-sustainable practices. The NEP was commissioned by the Government of Western Samoa through the Western Samoa Visitors Bureau. Guidelines laid down in the Ten Year Tourism Development Plan for Western Samoa 1992-2002 (1991) have been followed. An intensive anthropological study of the ecotourism potential, combined with the potential socio-economic impacts of ecotourism, was conducted for the WSVB (1993, 1995) by Michael Parsons.

Thanks to the government of Western Samoa and the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, major environmental challenges in Western Samoa have been identified. The status of environmental resources has been carefully assessed, and the most appropriate environmental management strategies have been formulated. Without this basic environmental understanding, the NEP would not have developed to what it is today. The NEP is now assisting in many of the environmental management strategies (e.g., combating deforestation, conserving biodiversity, developing appropriate land use practices, promoting sustainable economic growth, and preserving traditional arts and culture) by supporting community-based tourism projects in rural forest preserves.

An environmentally-friendly and culturally-responsible format of tourism has remained the blueprint of tourism development in Western Samoa for the past four years. Ecotourism recognizes that

the threatened forests of Samoa are the very basis of the Polynesian culture on-island, and that the cultural integrity is irreversibly impoverished if the forest resources are continually depleted.

Historically, travelers to Samoa have always been considered culturally intriguing. With over 300 villages living a traditional lifestyle, visitors are rarely disappointed (except when they recognize wanton over-exploitation of natural resources). Adding to the adventure is the lack of modern tourism infrastructure on-island. Western Samoa is still considered one of the lesser developed countries. The NEP ensures that visitors to Western Samoa get the best experience irrespective of the limited tourism resources and infrastructure. The NEP is providing visitors to Samoa with a safe and comfortable method of travel and an opportunity to interact with the people in rural areas in a very intimate manner.

One salient feature of the Samoan experience is the traditional hospitality offered by Samoans. The NEP ensures that cultural interpretation is an integral component of any travel/learning experience in Western Samoa. Travelers are soon exposed to the modern reality that this is no longer a cash-less society: often the only access to cash has been from the immediate sale of surrounding forests. It is this deforestation that is thwarting the viable future of a sustainable tourism industry. It is this deforestation that is partially aiding the cultural erosion as villagers lose their dependence on the forest for their survival and traditions. While the NEP is still in its infancy, the emphasis still remains on implementing feasible solutions to existing environmental problems using ecotourism as a management tool.

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ECOTOURISM ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Because of their size, small island nations have some of the most fragile ecosystems. The reliance on native wildlife as traditional sources of food is rapidly declining and is being replaced by imported processed foods. Loss of habitat has also meant the loss of traditional practices (e.g., use of medicinal plants for traditional healing, use of handicraft materials and house construction materials).

To think that ecotourism guidelines can be drawn up so as to help enhance the cultural integrity of indigenous peoples is a distinct possibility, provided our needs for tourist revenue are also being met. The NEP is endeavoring to include village home stays, eco-worker experiences, ethnological studies as well as a wide range of biological and sociological research in order to primarily address the erosion of our indigenous culture.

Ecotourists to Samoa are sharing their skills with respect to solving some of the major pollution problems on-island.

Ecotourism encourages the replacement of imported foods by promoting local cuisine in traditional settings. In addition, the prospect of using composting toilets has been suggested as one means of enhancing the ecotourism destinations and at the same time demonstrating economically-viable and environmentally-friendly technology.

An increasing human population (five-fold this century) is placing impossible demands on remaining natural resources. Eco-researchers are currently pursuing the feasibility of conducting a national environmental audit that will help address the linkages between human population growth and environmental issues. This subject may be the basis of a planned ecotourism workshop to be conducted by ecoplan:net and the International Society for Ecotourism Management in Western Samoa in 1997. Members of the Samoan Ecotourism Network recognize the need for such an audit if the tourism industry in Samoa is to become sustainable. No ecotourism management plan can function without knowing basic resource use patterns and relevant socio-economic impacts. This must be the basis of any major ecotourism guidelines.

Finally, ecotourists to Western Samoa soon appreciate the threat of global climate change to small island nations, especially those nations located in the cyclone belts. Realizing the vulnerability of coastal dwellers, especially peoples living on atolls about fifteen feet above sea level, ecotourists can have their conscience pushed a little further in the right direction: their cross-cultural experience and their travel/learning experience may result in a less consumptive lifestyle upon their return home.

Ecotourism guidelines should include methods of improving the environmental awareness of indigenous peoples as well as that of visitors. Experiencing the challenges of modernity for indigenous peoples is often the best way to appreciate the global consequences of pollution, habitat destruction, human population growth, and cultural erosion.

ROLE OF ECOTOURISTS

Ecotourists can assist the NEP by visiting selected eco-villages, by shopping in rural villages and preferentially supporting community-based tourism ventures. These include specialist accommodation, mangrove canoe tours, rainforest walks, exploring lava tube caves, wildlife tours to off-shore uninhabited bird-breeding islands, and getting involved in cultural activities (activities such as tapa cloth making and woodcarving that had virtually disappeared from many villages because of the loss of raw materials and hence the traditional skills). The community-based tourism programme on Manono Island is just one example of community groups revital-

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izing former traditional activities through tourism. Villagers are returning from urban areas to live on their island because of available opportunities.

Ecotourism is now being seen as at least part of the development solution. It provides a realistic alternative to the over-exploitation of natural resources. Ecotourism provides another source of income to rural peoples and helps to raise the level of environmental awareness in indigenous communities. Ecotourists introduce relevant forms of sustainable technology, often based on experience gained in other indigenous rural communities. Ecotourism is fighting for the rights of indigenous peoples who prefer to remain in their tribal lands. It is a social movement. It is an environmental movement.

Donations made by tourists to the Samoan Ecotourism Trust Fund help with the implementation of small village projects. Some villages today are still without flushing toilets. Some are even without running water. Very few, if any, have hot water. Ecotourists staying overnight in the villages are expected to live like the locals. There are very few disappointments. In fact, quite the opposite. Some ecotourists have acquired such meaningful friendships and tender memories that they are moved to tears on leaving Samoa. And isn't that what traveling is all about?

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THE CASE IN WESTERN SAMOA

Western Samoa is searching deeply for a solution to the problems associated with a modernizing society. Development techniques, in their current format, are having a detrimental effect on our natural resources, especially tropical rainforests.

As Western Samoa loses its forest resources, important habitats are disturbed, water catchments are degraded, villagers compete for scarce lands, and cultural integrity suffers. Completion of an environmental audit now will help clarify the urgency of bringing about sustainable forestry practices on-island. It does not make economic sense to fell our remaining primary rainforest on the island.

To assist the NEP, private ecotour operators, such as Eco-Tour Samoa, assist with the formulation and implementation of the NEP. A new Rainforest Ecolodge has recently been established on 150 acres of working tropical plantation, complete with manicured gardens of exotic plants. A small reforestation programme has been designed to help replace the existing non-indigenous forest with native trees. An eco-worker programme has been developed along the lines of a service project whereby assistance is sought to help implement environmental solutions on-site.

In Western Samoa eco-villages, there may not be five-star accommodations, but there is five-star hospitality and five-star tropi-

cal settings well removed from any evidence of modern life.

Eco-Tour Samoa offers intensive 10-14 day stays enabling visitors to see AND experience all that Western Samoa has to offer.

Eco-Tour Samoa is also actively marketing similar programmes in American Samoa and in Hawaii (especially the Big Island of Hawaii where the International Society for Ecotourism Management has a most fascinating ecotourism programme). One such programme linking Hawaii, American Samoa, and Western Samoa is called "Craters, Corals and Cultures." It is a carefully planned ecotourism experience that yields the best that all three destinations can offer to those interested in adventure, a travel/learn experience, exposure to indigenous peoples of the South Pacific, and an opportunity to assist in the conservation of endangered wildlife species.

To up-grade ecotourism marketing efforts, the Samoan Ecotourism Network (SEN) is now taking full advantage of Internet services. Information is available on the ecotourism programmes as well as the cultural and environmental issues being faced by indigenous peoples in the South Pacific. See the ORBIT Global Travel Guide, <http://www.pi.se/~orbit/samoa/welcome.html>. A Pacific Ecotourism Network (PEN) has been formed to link these similar ecotourism programmes in neighboring island nations. The South Pacific can become a stand-alone tourist destination, not just a stop-over, and can become an example of sustainable tourism from an indigenous perspective. For this to happen, visitors must be made aware that there is a wealth of opportunities and experiences that can be packaged into a holiday.

Without visitors, ecotourism programmes cannot flourish, and development opportunities and options are seriously compromised. The establishment of the SEN has helped promote this ecotouristic cause and visitors are requested to patronize these efforts. For example, accommodation centers that have been considered "close-to-nature," like the Rainforest Ecolodge, and accommodation centers considered "close-to-traditions," like Manono Island, have aligned themselves with ecotour operators and ecotourism destinations to provide guests with the penultimate ecotourism experience. Western Samoa's leading inbound tour operator, Island Hopper Vacations, has assisted greatly with the marketing of the NEP. Members of the SEN are also fortunate to have the Western Samoa Visitors Bureau assisting with the coordination and future development of the NEP.

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only economically viable alternative to deforestation. Many villages in Western Samoa have to meet the costs associated with building schools, churches, water supplies, and roads with their own funds. The inability to raise cash in the rural areas has led to the inevitable destruction of rainforests.

The success of ecotourism depends on the profitability of projects in each eco-village. The socio-economic impacts of ecotourism in these villages has yet to be assessed, and more solutions need to be found to existing problems if we are to all attain sustainable living in traditional villages. More thought needs to be given to the generation of income from non-timber forest products. Villagers also need to exploit the opportunity for eco-shopping.

Ecotourists can also help market proven ecotourism programmes. Word-of-mouth advertising is the most cost-effective method of marketing. The costs of marketing our programmes internationally by the usual means is prohibitive. Increasing reliance on Internet marketing may become a solution, provided we can access potential ecotourists and eco-researchers. This type of marketing must be very sophisticated in its targeting of travelers. Supportive "advertorials" can be published on e-zines (electronic magazines), such as Eco-Orbit (accessed via our web pages), and detailed descriptions of the range of experiences and opportunities available must be given. Already, the NEP has received attention on the Internet, and e-mail responses have just begun coming in. More guidelines could be developed for this integral aspect of the ecotourism programme.

To address the issue of marketing, the recent formation of the PEN (Pacific Ecotourism Network) has already proven to be successful. Travel wholesalers in Sweden, Switzerland, and Italy have requested multi-destination itineraries combining a range of ecotourism experiences. To date, Fiji and Vanuatu have linked with Niue, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Western Samoa. More South Pacific island destinations will be included when marketable ecotourism programmes have been designed.

INCENTIVES FOR ECO-RESEARCHERS TO VISIT SAMOA

There is a wealth of information that still needs to be gathered. Resolutions still need to be found. There are numerous projects that need to be implemented. Eco-researchers are invited to use the Rainforest Ecolodge as a base, help develop it into an ecotourism/environmental resource center, and participate in the NEP.

To date, ethnobotanical, ecotourism, sociological, and environmental researchers, as well as tourism and environment consultants, have contributed to the embryonic development of the Rainforest

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Ecolodge. Ideally, we wish to test various sustainable agricultural techniques as well as sustainable technologies before implementing them at selected ecotourism destinations. This site also lends itself to the principles of Permaculture as described by Keith Mollison.

Partners in the Rainforest Ecolodge project are adopting the “ecolodge guidelines” as published by The Ecotourism Society. Efforts are being made locally to design a “traditional-styled forest dwelling” incorporating composting toilets, low cost solar power hot water systems, as well as placing an emphasis on import replacement (e.g., use of locally grown foods and locally manufactured goods). The International Society for Ecotourism Management has pledged support for such a facility, and initial plans have been made to include accommodation facilities for visiting eco-researchers, eco-workers and ecotourists.

CONCLUSION

Many do not realize how quickly tropical rainforests are disappearing in Western Samoa, despite the fact that we are one of the few nations in the South Pacific that has banned the export of whole logs. That we may have only five years of accessible tropical rainforest remaining is unnerving to many tourism industry members and nature travelers to the South Pacific.

Deforestation is being driven by agricultural and urban expansion. Therefore, an environmental audit of our natural resources, including our export industries, is needed. Once the audit is completed, we can plan a sustainable tourism industry for Samoa—one that will enhance the cultural integrity of all Samoans and ensure the conservation of our remaining tropical forests. Members of the tourism industry are taking this bold initiative and are beginning an environmental audit. Guidelines can be formulated to show how ecotourists can be included in such an audit, especially showing how ecotourists encourage import replacements and support community-based tourism projects. Western Samoa is anxious to adopt further ecotourism guidelines that will assist not only a transition towards sustainable tourism but equitable and sustainable human development in general.

We invite all to review and examine the design and implementation of the NEP. We invite suggestions about how to improve our current environmental management, and enhance our cultural integrity. At the same time, we must provide our visitors with a meaningful, rewarding, and adventurous experience here in the South Seas at a time when our most attractive natural resources are under the greatest threat. French nuclear testing has further exacer-

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bated this problem, environmentally, economically, and even culturally in that, as Pacific Islanders, we are still being dictated to by foreign interests. Samoa mo Samoa (Samoa for Samoans). Ironically, in Western Samoa there are no foreign interests currently over-exploiting our natural resources. It is now quite clear that improved use of natural resources by Samoans is warranted.

Members of SEN and PEN have rapidly adopted the basic principles of ecotourism and are now doing their utmost to push industry members toward sustainable tourism. Our members study and practice sustainable arts, and are anxious to receive more detailed ecotourism guidelines that will provide answers. We are encouraging the industry to formulate ecotourism guidelines that are easily implementable in developing countries like Western Samoa. There is no room for esoteric guidelines. We need practical or immediate solutions for rural villagers currently facing life-threatening situations.

In conclusion, and as the rightful custodians of our own resources, the following reference is presented to highlight the empathy Samoans have for their forest resources:

My fore-fathers had a dream. They had a dream that one day the land and the rainforest would be saved for eternity, they had a dream that the land and these would forever be well looked after, and not destroyed and distributed to other people.

I share that dream. Five times the logging companies have been here asking for our forest. I have been deeply depressed since they put a lot of pressure on all of us, persuading the people in our village to sell the forest for a few dollars. I resisted, because I love my people and the land more than the money. I felt an immense relief when we were offered an opportunity by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation to realize the dream of my forefathers, to save and protect the forest, the birds, the flying foxes, and the marine resources.

I believe that we can only be masters of our destiny if we take care of our environment. The protection of our forest has brought dignity and strength to our community and gives hope for our children and for all generations to come. Fa'afetai tele lava mo lo outou alofa, Ia fa'amanuia e le Atua lo tatoulalolagi ma lo tatou lumanai'i.

The former statement comes from Ulu Taufu'asisina Tausaga, the paramount talking chief of Tafua and Vice-President of Fa'asao Savaii [Save Savaii Island].

There is no room for esoteric guidelines. We need practical or immediate solutions for rural villagers currently facing life-threatening situations.

Visitors to Western Samoa interested in indigenous cultural tourism now find themselves directly or indirectly assisting tropical rainforest conservation efforts. The authors strongly believe that cultural enhancement is possible through ecotouristic programmes, and we invite anthropologists and other eco-researchers to document our cultural, economic, environmental, and social problems.

Ideally, we are all looking for acceptable solutions. Fortunately, ecotourism has already proven to be a powerful environmental tool and a powerful development tool, capable of reversing some of the major environmental challenges in Western Samoa. But, like all other projects, an appropriate Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) should be carried out before the project proceeds any further.

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