

# **RURAL DEVELOPMENT FORESTRY NETWORK**

## **Forestry on Customary-owned Land: Some Experiences from the South Pacific**

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## **Summary**

Questions of land tenure, resource ownership and use are fundamental to any examination of forestry issues in the South Pacific. This paper reviews some critical conceptual issues that provide a framework for understanding the problems and opportunities for forestry in the South Pacific, both for conservation and sustainable management of primary forests, and for reforestation.

These issues are illustrated by examples taken from New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA) support for forestry in Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands.

A major focus of the NZODA programme is on reforestation of previously logged land to provide landowners with a sustainable source of income through the development of a renewable resource. In the past, reforestation has been confined to government-owned or leased land but increasing attention is now being given to developing models for commercial reforestation on customary-owned land. Using an example from the Solomon Islands of a proposed joint venture between a small landowning community and a private investor, the major social, cultural, and economic issues associated with this type of development are discussed.

The second major focus of NZODA is on promoting alternative sources of income to reduce economic pressures for logging and land clearance in forest areas with high ecological and/or cultural values. Examples where this approach has been tried include the development of ecotourism in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. An alternative method to protect biologically valuable forests is to provide landowners with financial compensation for forgoing the commercial use of their forests. This

approach can only be a stop-gap measure, however, and needs to be augmented by the development of sustainable income-generating activities.

The need to take issues of ownership and equity into account in designing projects is highlighted. This requires a participatory approach that takes full account of cultural factors and demands a high degree of flexibility on the part of the donor agency.

## **Introduction**

'We need the forest to be standing there for life to flow from the forest to the sea. We cannot be smarter than God.' (Batibasaga, 1993).

Forests and trees have always played an important role in the well-being of the peoples and ecosystems of the island nations in the South Pacific (Figure 1). In the larger Melanesian countries (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu), forests have contributed significantly to the national economies through employment, income generation and export earnings. In the smaller high island states of recent volcanic or raised limestone origin (Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, etc.), the contribution of forests to the national economy has been mainly in the form of timber for housing and traditional uses, fuelwood, medicines, shelter, and food. These economic uses are reinforced by the 'silent' but vital functions of forests: protection of soils, watershed management, genetic resources, and carbon retention. Apart from these economic and environmental uses, forests play an important role in the spiritual and cultural values of the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific.

The multiple roles of forests and trees have long been recognised in the islands of the South Pacific. The contribution of forests to the national economy, the household, the environment, and culture are very much part of the South Pacific way of life. In addition, as almost all the land and its resources, including forests, are held under systems of customary land tenure, the relationship between forests and the well-being of people is very close.



**Figure 1: Map of the South Pacific showing the location of the major Melanesian and Polynesian countries.**

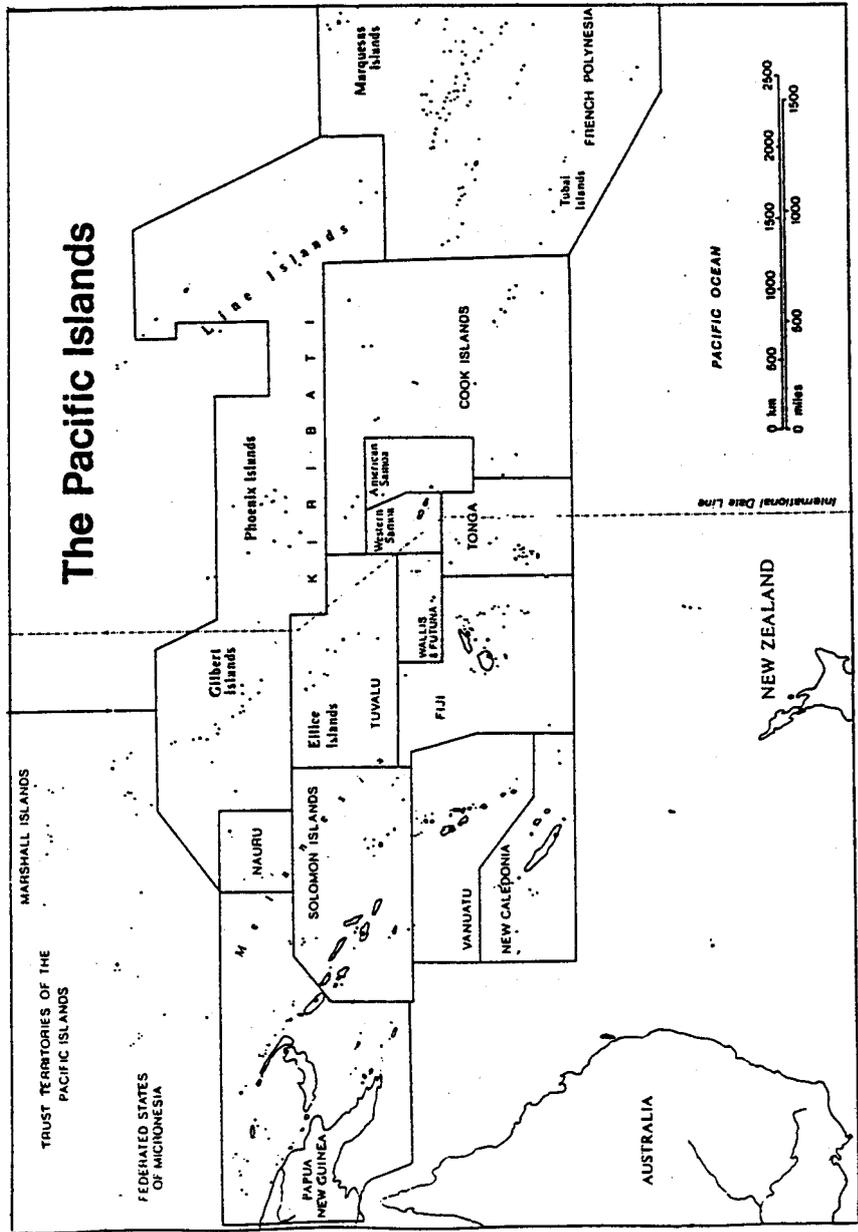


Figure 1: Map of the South Pacific showing the location of the major Melanesian and Polynesian countries.

This relationship is particularly strong in the Melanesian countries of the South Pacific: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu (Table 1). These countries have the largest remaining areas of primary forest in the South Pacific, most of which is held under customary systems of land tenure. For the majority of landowners, their forest resources are their main assets and sources of income. Table 1 also shows the important contribution of forest products to export earnings.

**Table 1: Land and forest resources in Melanesia**

Country	Land area (million ha)	% of land area under customary ownership	Natural forest area (million ha)	% contribution of forest products to export earnings in 1994
Papua New Guinea	46.9	93%	36.4	20%
Solomon Islands	2.8	87%	2.4	60%
Fiji	1.8	83%	0.88	12%
Vanuatu	1.2	>90%	0.43	12%

Source: Respective Country Reports to the Heads of Forestry Meeting, Fiji, September 1995

There has been a significant increase in local and international interest in forestry in the South Pacific over the last decade. The main focus of this increased interest from national governments, the donor community and international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been on the following areas:

- ! conservation and sustainable management of primary and secondary indigenous forests for their utilitarian, environmental, biological, spiritual and cultural values;
- ! logging mainly as a source of income, but also for land clearance for agriculture;
- ! reforestation activities for economic and environmental reasons.

Logging activities are a major concern in the sustainable use of the existing forest resources of the Melanesian countries of the South Pacific. In Papua New Guinea

(PNG), for example, the sustainable harvest volume from the available natural forest has been estimated at 3 million m<sup>3</sup>/annum, assuming a 40 year cutting cycle. This compares with a current permitted cut of 8.5 million m<sup>3</sup>/annum. The actual cut in 1993 and 1994 was well below the permitted cut, at around 3 million m<sup>3</sup>/annum. However, as logging activities are very unevenly distributed within PNG, these 3 million m<sup>3</sup> came from only part of the remaining forests and do not represent a sustainable harvest. Together with the significant increase in actual cut observed in 1995, this suggests that, in many parts of PNG, current logging activities are unsustainable (Duncan, 1994).

To conserve these remaining indigenous forests in the South Pacific, efforts have been made to reduce deforestation (either from commercial logging or for agriculture) through a range of activities. These include attempts at sustainable management, protection of valuable forests through various mechanisms, provision of alternative sources of income for resource owners, and promoting non-wood uses of forests. These attempts recognise that, for most resource owners, forests are their major asset and that their social and economic development depends on the income derived from the use of this valuable resource.

Reforestation is another activity which aims to relieve the pressure on primary forests by providing a sustainable source of income for countries as well as communities. This will, however, provide a solution over the longer term rather than in the near future. In countries such as Fiji, where reforestation activities commenced quite early, planted forests account for 11% of the land area. In 1994, wood production from planted softwoods and hardwoods accounted for over 73% of the total wood production in Fiji.

In most South Pacific countries, the focus of reforestation has been on government-owned land because of the perceived difficulties of working on customary-owned land. There are few viable and replicable models of commercial reforestation enterprises in the South Pacific on customary-owned land. To try and rectify this situation, New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA) support for forestry in the Melanesian countries of the South Pacific is focussing on developing models for commercial (small and medium-scale) reforestation of deforested customary-owned land. A second area of attention for NZODA is in forest areas with high ecological and/or cultural values, where the focus is on providing alternative sources of income to reduce the economic pressures for logging and land clearance.

This paper focuses on the Melanesian countries of the South Pacific. First, some of the key underlying issues with regard to forestry activities on customary-owned land are examined. This is followed by a discussion of how these concepts can be applied both in the sustainable management of indigenous forests and in reforestation activities. The discussion draws on some of the practical experiences of NZODA funded projects in the Solomon Islands, as well as in Fiji and Vanuatu.

## **Some Underlying Conceptual Issues**

The issues of land tenure, resource ownership and use are fundamental to any examination of forestry issues in the South Pacific. This section looks at some conceptual issues that provide a framework for understanding the problems and opportunities for forestry in the South Pacific, both for the conservation and sustainable management of primary forests, and for reforestation.

### **People and Land**

In the South Pacific, land is central to people's identity, their culture, traditions and spiritual values. Prior to the arrival of Europeans and the onset of colonialism, land tenure and rights to use land were closely intertwined in a system of obligation within kinship groups and between groups through marriage and other forms of alliance. Land was a vital part of traditions, beliefs and values.

For example, Maenu'u (1984) describes land within traditional societies of the Solomon Islands as 'one part of an integrated whole comprised of gods, land and tribes'. This cosmological perspective held the tribe as the main unit of society and the most important for maintaining security. At the apex were the Gods, with land and the tribe being equally important. These three elements firmly bound the people together. Gods consisted of dead ancestors and as such were specific to a tribe. Land was acquired by pioneer settlers and passed on from generation to generation. The tribe normally consisted of individuals sharing a common ancestor who first settled a new piece of land. In this way, Gods, land, tribe, and individuals were united and found meaning in traditional Solomon Islands societies.

The association between these four elements – Gods, land, tribes, and individuals – constituted an interrelated and mutually reinforcing system. Land belonged not just to the tribe but also to the people and to the Gods. People belonged to the Gods, to the land and to the tribe. The impact of colonialism disrupted this delicate

balance. The tribal Gods were first replaced by the concept of one God who was not seen to have the same intricate relationship with people and the land. Secondly, colonialism disrupted the close relationship between people, their tribes and the land, ie. the concept of the tribe as custodian of the land. The introduction of an alien system of land registration took land administration away from the tribe and reduced its influence. This removed the tribe from its mediating role between people and land.

Today, the legal system enshrined in the constitution of the Solomon Islands recognises three types of land ownership systems. It provides for individual ownership and two types of collective ownership: common and joint ownership. Therefore, it does not recognise customary land tenure as such, but vests ownership rights in individuals or groups. The vesting of rights in smaller groups of people, as in land registration, means that some people become landless as land itself becomes a traded commodity. Land becomes alienated and no longer part of the traditional system, leaving people isolated as the only remaining element of the original system of Gods, land, tribes and people.

## **Land Tenure Systems**

The concept of land ownership did not exist in the societies of the South Pacific in pre-colonial times. Land and the resources of the land were assets inherited from the ancestors and held in trust by the current generation for future generations. All land was held tribally and there was no general right of individual or private ownership except the right of families to occupy, use or cultivate certain portions of tribal land subject to the paramount right of the tribe.

In the Solomon Islands, for example, land was vested in a group ('tribe') of less than 100 people. Within this group, individuals had different rights to deal in, or use land, but did not own it. Rights depended on the individual's relationship to the first settlers and could be primary, secondary or tertiary. Primary rights could be passed on through the male lineage (eg. in Kwara'ae in Malaita Province) or the female lineage (eg. in North New Georgia). Secondary rights were then obtained through the female and male lineage respectively. Tertiary rights belonged to the wider community – visitors, guests, or those not part of the tribe.

The coming of colonialism and the imposition of western concepts of individual property rights disrupted the traditional systems. In the Solomon Islands, for

example, the arrival of Europeans altered land tenure systems in many ways, in part because exchange systems and commodities in traditional cultures were not sufficient to obtain the European goods which people wanted.

'To enter the new exchange economy, one had either to sell one's land to Europeans, work for European plantations, or produce cash crops oneself. Whichever course one took had significant repercussions on land tenure.' (Crocombe, 1971).

Land alienation occurred all over the Pacific but reached its peak in New Zealand, particularly after the Land Wars. Over a 140 year period, land 'ownership' by Maori went from 100% in pre-colonial times to around 5% in the 1980s. The different paradigms of land 'ownership' had a lot to do with the alienation of much of the land. In many cases, chiefs were under the misapprehension that they were granting temporary rights of occupancy to European settlers as they had traditionally granted user rights to visitors in the past. However, the European settlers thought that they were buying individual property rights to the land (Ward, 1974).

### ***Equity and resource-user rights – a case from Fiji***

The changing paradigms of land ownership, brought about by colonialism, have had an impact not only on land tenure systems but inevitably also on the social structures within the affected societies. This is illustrated by the introduction of land registration in Fiji and its impact on current resource ownership and user rights (NZODA, 1995a). The basis for Fijian land ownership is the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB), literally 'the Book of Family Lines', which lists the members of all *tokatoka* (extended family groups) in Fiji and thereby virtually all claimants to Fijian ethnicity. The VKB records provide legal title for members of Fijian clans to their traditional land holdings and name people belonging to each clan. They are kept according to *tokatoka*, which usually number between 50 and 150 closely related kin, as explained in Box 1.

**Box 1 Tribal structures in Fiji**

*Vanua* refers to a group of people or tribe and embodies their beliefs and values. The *Vanua* provides a strong sense of place, of belonging to the land.

*Yavusa* is the primary sub-division of the *Vanua*, a clan or sub-tribe.

*Mataqali* is the secondary sub-division of the *Vanua*, ie. a sub-clan or land-owning group. The members of the *mataqali* come under the authority of a *Turagi ni Mataqali*; use of *mataqali* land is either decided by consensus within the *mataqali* or by the *Turagi ni Mataqali*.

*Tokatoka* is the tertiary subdivision of the *Vanua*, ie. an extended family or related group varying in composition from representatives of one household to several families tracing their descent from one common ancestor.

The VKB records originate in a political philosophy adopted in the 1880s by the first governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon and his advisers, in response to the so-called 'fatal impact' that Europeans had on Pacific Island societies, particularly the alienation of native lands by settlers in New Zealand and Hawaii. On the assumption that every piece of land in Fiji had traditional owners and clear boundaries defined by ancient and immutable custom, Gordon set in motion a search for this traditional land tenure system (France, 1969).

For many years the Native Lands Commission (NLC) made slow progress dealing with complex local variations of land traditions, its work hindered by Fijian opposition to NLC goals. However, in 1912, the colonial government appointed G. V. Maxwell as Lands Commissioner and matters moved ahead more quickly, though with little regard for the complexities and diversity of Fijian social customs. In every part of the country, Fijian people were required to redefine local social arrangements into the Maxwell framework to ensure that their land claims succeeded as the NLC conducted its surveys throughout Fiji. Thus the VKB became a legally defined model of Fijian social structure as people began to define ownership in a narrowly legal manner rather than by reference to wider social responsibilities and family obligations.

Another consequence of the Maxwell framework was that membership of a *mataqali* (sub-clan) was now defined solely by patrilineal descent. This narrow definition excluded local differences in custom, traditional ways of absorbing outsiders into local communities, and important genealogical links through women.

These issues have significant implications for forestry projects. If the project concentrates just on the *mataqali* (sub-clan), then ownership and distribution of benefits will not necessarily be equitable. A *mataqali* is defined by male descent, not by residence, and a village contains many people, including non-landowning residents and women, who are not legally members of that *mataqali*, although they contribute towards it. These issues are discussed in more detail below in the case study on ecotourism projects in Fiji.

## **Community Participation**

Another underlying issue relevant to this analysis of forestry projects is community participation in the design, management and control of projects. A fundamental element of community participation is the acceptance by the donor agency that effective participation requires access to and control of resources by all sectors of the community. Empowerment of people through their own collective action and organisation in order to gain access to and control over resources must be an integral part of the project design. This requires their involvement in the decision making process. In turn, this requires awareness raising, capacity building and outside facilitation (as opposed to control) to promote participation.

NZODA experiences with community based projects have identified a number of key issues for effective participation by communities:

- ! The development of a partnership between all sectors of the village community: the landowners, chiefs, non-landowning residents, women, youth, etc. The fostering of partnerships requires that within the broader framework of the tribe, there is sufficient incentive for individual families and groups within the community to benefit from the project activities.
- ! The involvement of all sectors of the community in all stages of the project from early decision making to implementation. To achieve this, donors must be ready to share control over project design and management with local communities, NGOs and partner governments.
- ! A willingness on the part of the partner government to allow local communities to exercise control over resources and to assist them with capacity building.

- ! Access to all relevant information by all members of the community.
- ! Effective coordination structures at the national and local levels that will promote participation, devolve responsibilities, and build capacity for management at the community and village levels.
- ! A need for management structures at the village, project and national levels to evolve into enabling institutions rather than controlling the process at all stages. An effective, enabling and efficient management structure is a precondition for viable enterprises that are environmentally and socially sustainable.

## **Sustainable Management of Indigenous Forests**

The NZODA programme has promoted the sustainable management of indigenous forests in the larger Melanesian countries of the South Pacific through two main types of projects:

- ! development of alternative income-generating activities;
- ! technical assistance and support for conservation of indigenous forests.

An examination of both types of projects requires an understanding of the potential conflicts and synergies between conservation of natural resources and their management to provide for social and economic development for the resource owners. As stated earlier, for most rural communities in the South Pacific, forest resources are their main assets. Thus any attempt to conserve these forest resources must at the same time provide a viable and sustainable alternative source of income to enable communities to meet their social and economic needs. The effective participation of communities in the planning and implementation of projects is critical to the success of any conservation and development activities.

## **Conservation and Development**

In the past, conservation and development were seen as 'either-or' options. In recent times, this concept has evolved so that conservation and development are not seen as incompatible with each other. There is a 'creative tension' between conservation and development which needs to be harnessed and developed so that important

forest values (biodiversity, environmental, spiritual and cultural) can be protected while ensuring that local communities do not forgo social and economic development.

This creative tension between conservation and development has begun to be recognised by the donor community. An example of this is the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP), a five year endeavour to identify and establish a series of Conservation Area Projects (CAPs) in ten countries of the South Pacific. The SPBCP defines a CAP as 'a large, diverse area which contains important features for the conservation of the biological diversity of the region or country, and in which there are agreed criteria for development based on long-term ecological sustainability ... [The CAPs] are terrestrial and/or marine resource management schemes incorporating development activities which respect and enhance the natural environment, while providing for the economic well-being of the local resource owners and communities. The distinction from a national park or reserve is the SPBCP's acceptance of the need for communities to continue to use their natural environment for their subsistence and economic well-being'. (SPREP/UNDP, 1994).

The NZODA programme has been closely involved with the SPBCP in a number of countries (Vanuatu, Fiji, Western Samoa) and the definition of the CAP is consistent with New Zealand's approach to conservation and development in the South Pacific. The following examples from the NZODA programme illustrate the increasing awareness of both the donor and partner governments that conservation and development must go hand in hand.

### **Income-generating Activities – NZODA Support for Ecotourism in Fiji**

Since 1990, NZODA has contributed funds for the development of two ecotourism sites in Fiji: Bouma on Taveuni Island, and Koroyanitu on Viti Levu. The two projects have been identified by the Fiji Government as important forest areas for conservation because of their high natural and cultural values.

#### ***The Bouma project***

The Bouma ecotourism project in Fiji is a community-based conservation and development project on Fiji's third largest island, Taveuni. An island of volcanic origin, Taveuni has the highest rainfall in Fiji and is unique in retaining over 60%

of its land as undisturbed tropical forest. Forest types include tropical lowland, cloud, beach, and mangrove forest. Most of this forest is on customary-owned land and is classed as forest reserve (landowners retain rights to customary usage), nature reserve (restricted customary rights), or protection forest (too steep for logging).

The primary purpose of the Bouma ecotourism project is to assist in the conservation, protection and enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage of the project site. This is to be achieved by creating local employment and income-generating opportunities for landowners and village communities through the development of ecotourism. Thus development is seen as the vehicle for achieving conservation.

The project illustrates how the priorities of government agencies and donors can differ from those of communities. The former have conservation as the goal with income-generating activities as the means to achieving that end. On the other hand, landowners and the community see social and economic development (education, health facilities, road access, etc.) as the aim, and the development of ecotourism based on the conservation values of their main assets (their natural resources and their cultural heritage) as the means to achieving that end.

In the case of the Bouma project, the initial emphasis of the government and donor agencies on conservation, meant that some of the social, institutional and cultural issues were not fully considered in the early stages of the project. The ecotourism project was seen by the project designers as an incentive (of the kind that has been referred to as a 'bribe' by Smith (1994)) to stop logging, rather than as a genuine attempt to provide a sustainable source of income for the people of Bouma. However, once that immediate objective had been achieved and the pressure for logging had eased, the project began to focus more on providing the communities with sustainable alternative sources of income.

The 1995 Review concluded that the project had achieved one of its main aims – local commitment to conservation (NZODA, 1995b). Using this as a foundation, the project has now moved to consolidate the early conservation achievements by focussing more on the social and economic development objectives.

### ***The Koroyanitu model***

The Koroyanitu Range, which has the last remaining area of unlogged tropical montane rainforest and cloud forest in western Vitu Levu, contains a diversity of flora including pure stands of valuable timber species such as Fiji kauri (*Agathis vitiensis*). The area also contains a number of ancient and historic sites including villages, fortifications, ritual worship sites and terraced gardens (Baba, in prep.). The area is a watershed for the city of Lautoka and for surrounding villages and settlements.

The project area, comprising 19,150 ha, belongs to 50 landowning units from 13 different villages. The actual conservation area consists of all land above 600 m. Of these 2,850 ha, about 83% belong to landowners residing in the four villages of Abaca, Vakabuli, Nalotawa, and Navilawa, which are the villages targeted for the NZODA supported ecotourism project. The project began in 1993 with simultaneous activities centred on raising awareness and assisting in the development of alternative income-generating opportunities through small-scale tourism.

In the first two years, a principal objective of the project – achieving local commitment to conservation – was attained. In all discussions with the 1995 Review team, the people of Abaca constantly referred to the importance of maintaining their forests to benefit themselves and their descendants (NZODA, 1995b). They were aware of the need for their part of the project to succeed so that it could serve as a model for others. Ecotourism activities provided the local community with a significant source of income through park fees, transport, accommodation and food, as well as improving road access. With greater awareness of the benefits of conservation, the communities are ready to build on this solid foundation to work towards managing their resources in a sustainable manner. They now plan to reforest areas that were deforested many years ago (prior to the project) with exotic and native species.

The Koroyanitu area has been accepted by the SPBCP as the CAP for Fiji. The ecotourism project is expanding to include all the major villages in Koroyanitu. The progress made during the early stages is being consolidated by focussing on helping the landowners in Koroyanitu to further develop their potential for earning a sustainable income through conservation and development activities. These include:

- ! capacity building for the communities concerned in business management, ecotourism activities (guides, handicrafts, hospitality), resource management, diversification of agricultural products, etc.;
- ! assistance with improved management and decision-making structures, including the setting up of cooperatives;
- ! linkages with other ecotourism sites and assistance with marketing and promotion of the ecotourism attraction;
- ! better road access for tourists as well as for the community, making it easier for them to take their agricultural products to market.

### ***Some lessons for income-generation projects***

The change of focus in Bouma, and the example of Koroyanitu, show that it is important to work within the social and cultural context of Fiji to ensure that the benefits of social and economic development activities are shared equitably within the communities. The two projects raise a number of interesting issues concerning equity, ownership and participation.

For example, in Taveuni, the site of the Bouma ecotourism project, many people are second and third-generation descendants of plantation workers from other parts of Fiji who have married into local families. Legally they have no land ownership rights as they are not registered in the VKB. Thus, if the project deals solely with the landowners, more than half the village population will have no say in the running of the projects.

A balanced approach is required, therefore, in dealing with the owners of resources (as legally defined) and other (non-landowning) members of the community. The ecotourism projects at both project sites are concerned with tangible assets such as land and trees, as well as intangible assets such as the village community and lifestyle. These cultural aspects are as much a part of the attraction for tourists as the natural attractions. Although the *mataqali* are the legally registered owners (under the existing system) of the land and resources, the culture of the village is derived from all its members, landowners and non-landowning residents alike. So it could be argued that all members of the village community are 'owners' of the cultural ambience. The question of whether a project or business development is based around the *mataqali* or around the village community as a whole should be clearly defined so that all stakeholders are fully aware of the implications.

This concept of dual ownership of projects can be worked out in an equitable and culturally sensitive manner. For example, membership of cooperatives can include both landowners and other villagers who can contribute through their labour (Baba, in prep.). Similarly, it should be possible to design and implement a management structure that provides for both landowners and other members of the community.

In summary, the success of the ecotourism projects in Fiji depends in the first instance on the commitment of the *mataqali* (the land and resource owners) to resource conservation as a viable basis for income generation through ecotourism. At the same time, success depends on the cooperation and commitment of the entire village community because the ecotourism enterprise is based on both the natural resource base (owned by the *mataqali*) and the cultural base (which belongs to the entire village community).

### **Income-generating Activities – the Marovo Lagoon Model**

Learning from these experiences, an approach similar to the Koroyanitu model has been taken by NZODA in the Marovo Lagoon project in the Solomon Islands (Figure 2).

The Marovo lagoon is formed by islands and is the largest lagoon of its type in the world with a double barrier reef system. The ecosystem formed by the combination of the largely intact primary forest, the lagoon and the coral reefs is considered to be a potential site for World Heritage listing.

In 1989, the Solomon Islands Government requested assistance from NZODA in the preparation of the application for World Heritage listing. After the initial appraisal of the proposal, it was decided that the emphasis should be on providing landowners with income-generating opportunities as an alternative to logging of the primary forest. Considerable efforts have therefore been put into the preparatory stages. A participatory approach has been used to increase awareness of the potential benefits and constraints of World Heritage listing and to identify potential income-generating activities such as ecotourism, handicrafts and beekeeping. The main emphasis has been on sustainable resource management rather than protection.



**Figure 2: Map of Solomon Islands showing the location of the Marovo Lagoon, Kohinggo Island and Malaita projects.**

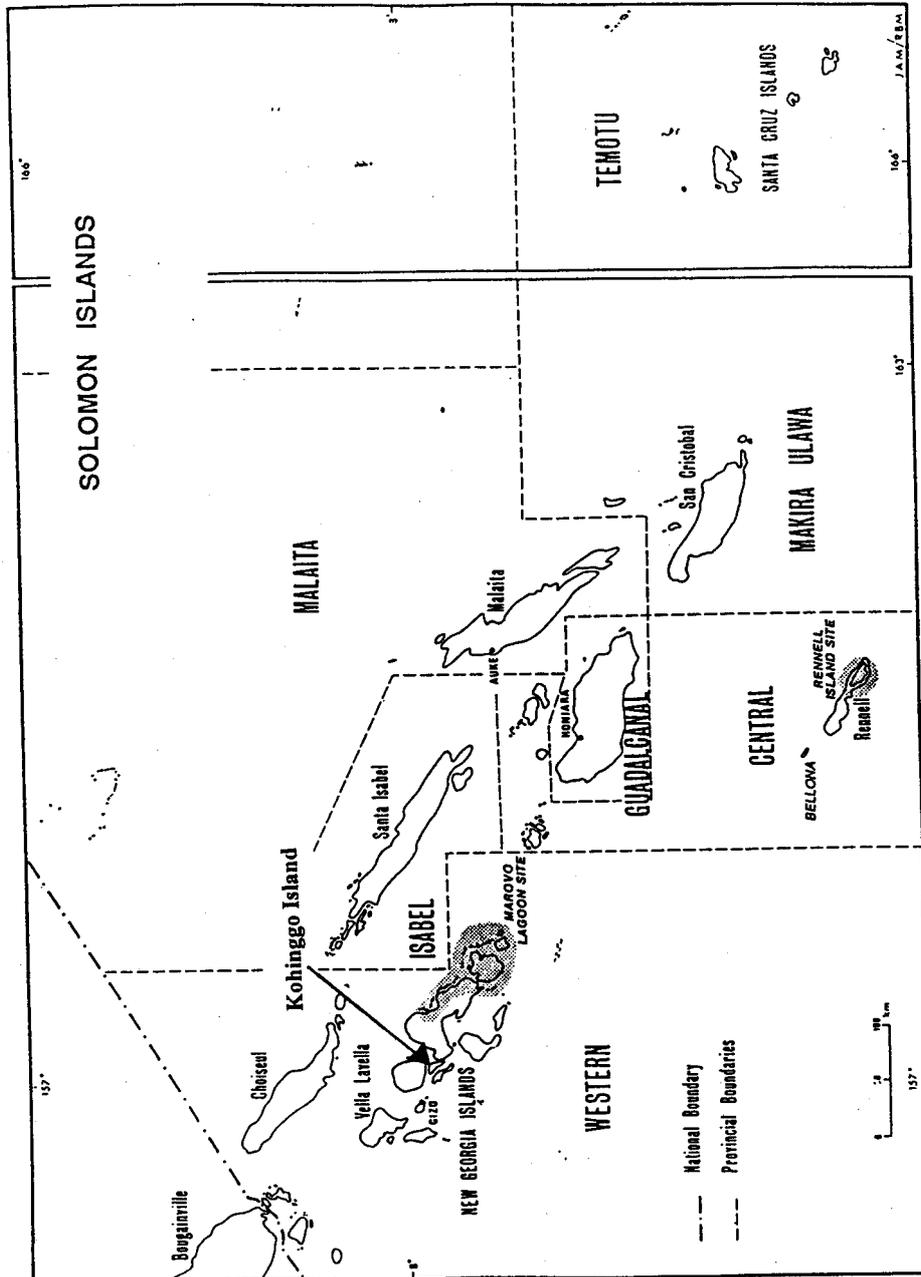


Figure 2: Map of Solomon Islands showing the location of the Marovo Lagoon, Kohingo Island and Malaita projects.

The current NZODA project is providing technical assistance and financial support for a range of social and economic development activities in the Marovo Lagoon. The project's objectives are to:

- ! promote sustainable small business development;
- ! increase employment opportunities for women and youth;
- ! promote ecotourism development;
- ! facilitate community resource management planning and education;
- ! improve the status of women;
- ! achieve World Heritage listing.

Thus the emphasis is on sustainable social and economic development for the region, with conservation a secondary priority. The project design is also being worked out over a long period of time (18 months) with the participation of the communities concerned. This project highlights the need for more time to be allocated to preparatory activities and for an equal emphasis to be placed on conservation and development.

### **Protection through Financial Compensation – Erromango Reserve**

A third approach being used is one in which the conservation priority is more upfront. Landowners are provided with financial compensation to meet their social and economic needs in return for agreeing to protect forest areas of high ecological and cultural values.

The Erromango Kauri Reserve is situated on the island of Erromango in the Tafea group of islands in Southern Vanuatu. The reserve covers an area of 3205 ha and includes the remaining major stands of kauri (*Agathis macrophylla*) in Vanuatu. The landowners of the reserve reside in the villages just outside the reserve. The landowners and the local community use the reserve area extensively for hunting, gathering food and traditional medicines, and collecting sandalwood for sale (Wakelin *et al.*, 1995).

The significance of the kauri stands was first recognised in 1971 when the idea of a protected area was suggested. The cultural and ecological importance of the kauri and the potential commercial value of the trees for the landowners was confirmed by subsequent studies. This was followed by the recognition that for the kauri forests to be protected, the landowners should be compensated. In 1995, agreement

was reached by the Vanuatu government with the landowners for a five year lease in return for financial compensation provided by the European Union. NZODA agreed to provide assistance with the formulation of a management plan for the reserve and for technical assistance and capacity building.

This compensation scheme provides an alternative model for the conservation of important forest areas. However, it can only be an interim measure as it fails to address the critical issues of continuing dependency on outside assistance and sustainability – protection may be assured for five years but after that the landowners may still decide to log their forests. This is a risk that can only be countered by increased awareness and the provision of viable and sustainable alternative sources of income.

The lease agreement provides a breathing space of five years within which the communities can be assisted to develop alternative income-generating activities and therefore relieve the long-term pressures for logging of the valuable timber resources. Activities suggested in the NZODA management plan for the reserve range from ecotourism to the use of non-wood forest products, and should be implemented over the next few years.

## **Reforestation on Customary-owned Land**

In the past, reforestation activities in the South Pacific by a variety of donors have concentrated on plantation forestry on Government-owned land because of the perceived difficulties of working on customary-owned land. However, as most land suitable for forestry in the South Pacific is on customary-owned land, it is necessary for effective models of reforestation on customary land to be developed.

The Solomon Islands provide a good example of NZODA experience in this area. The Solomon Islands Government has recognised the need for reforestation to provide a sustainable forest resource for the country. The Malaita Reforestation Project (1985-1989), funded by NZODA, showed that it was feasible to establish forestry plantations on customary-owned land. The Malaita project, and its successor, the Customary Land Reforestation Project (CLRFP), have focused on developing workable models for reforestation of customary-owned land. These have concentrated on reforestation of previously logged land using two models: small-scale forestry and commercial forestry.

## **Small-scale Forestry – The Malaita Model**

The primary focus of the small-scale forestry component of the CLRFP has been to promote reforestation on customary-owned land to assist landowners to meet their domestic needs for forest products (wood, fuel, traditional medicines, non-wood forest products) and for cash incomes.

The original Malaita project (1985-1989) provided a model in which landowners were provided with incentives in the form of payment for labour for planting trees on their own land. However, a review of the project in 1990 found that, by providing incentive payments, the project created a dependency on outside assistance rather than empowering landowners to work towards self-sufficiency (NZODA, 1990). Although a number of small plantations had been established, landowners were reluctant to replant any further areas unless incentives were given. This limited the expansion of the project to larger areas.

As a result, the project was redesigned to move away from past practices of planting trees on customary-owned land to assisting landowners to carry out reforestation themselves. At the same time, the project recognised that landowners would need continued technical support from government agencies. Thus an important component of the project was to strengthen the Forestry Extension Service (FES) of the Ministry of Natural Resources. One of the original objectives of the FES had been to 'design and implement, in consultation with landowners, appropriate types and scales of extension forestry activities.' In order to achieve this, the FES had to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the communities so that the extension activities were tailored to those needs.

The focus of FES activities over the last five years has been on planting hardwood species like teak and mahogany, which produce tangible benefits after 25 to 30 years, and on assisting communities to meet their short-term needs for fuelwood and other forest products. In some cases, longer-term species have proved suitable because of low population pressures. In others, the CLRFP has not been able to fulfil the more immediate needs of landowners and communities for income and/or domestic uses. The latter is particularly true for women who devote significant amounts of time to fuelwood gathering (over one hour daily in one example in Guadalcanal), while timber trees are being planted and maintained in sites close to the village by the men. The project has, however, been able to increase awareness of the benefits of reforestation and has had difficulty meeting the demand for tree

seedlings in some areas.

As a result, the recent Review (NZODA, 1995) has recommended a further change in direction, with an increasing emphasis on agroforestry and on meeting the domestic wood needs of the community. This would build on the considerable ground work of the CLRFP and other forestry 'experiments' in the Solomon Islands. These provide good demonstration models that could be utilised within the CLRFP. For example, a four hectare stand of 20-year old teak, mahogany and *Gmelina* trees on customary-owned land in Guadalcanal has been maintained by the landowners since a research trial was established in the early 1970s, and then 'forgotten' by government agencies. The landowners continued to look after the trees and can expect to earn a significant income from them over the next decade. It is interesting to note that, in this case, no 'incentive' payments were made and there was no donor agency involvement.

These examples highlight the need to meet the priorities of the communities concerned and to be flexible in the approaches used. Where pressure on land is not a problem, communities are prepared to invest their land, resources and labour in long-term forestry projects that will yield an income after 20 to 30 years. However, these plantations have to be complemented by small-scale agroforestry activities that will help meet the domestic needs of the communities. Where population pressure is high, the emphasis should be on agroforestry for domestic and fuelwood needs, with some small-scale forestry for cash income. In either case, active participation of the communities is necessary in all stages of the forestry project: planning, implementation and harvest.

### **Commercial Forestry – the Aqorae Model**

The purpose of the second component of the CLRFP is to demonstrate a model for reforestation on customary-owned land as a long-term investment. This is a proposal to develop a forestry plantation as a commercial joint venture between a landowning group and a private investor.

The proposed site for the venture is a 200 ha site on the island of Kohinggo in North New Georgia (Figure 2). The landowners will invest their land and an outside investor will provide finance. Labour will be provided by the landowners at market rates or, when they are unable to do so, by other communities in the area. Management responsibilities for the venture will rest with a Board of Directors

representing both the landowners and the investor. Day-to-day management of forestry operations will be contracted out to a local forestry plantation firm.

The CLRFP has identified a landowning group, the Aqorae community, in North New Georgia as well as a suitable piece of land to which the Aqorae community has been allocated user rights. The proposal for the establishment of the commercial joint venture was considered to be sufficiently attractive to an outside investor to warrant the development of a business plan in mid-1994.

The role of NZODA in developing this proposal has been to act as a facilitator and broker between the Aqorae community and the (as yet unidentified) investor. NZODA is concerned with protecting the interests of the community and the investor, as the well-being of both parties is necessary for the viability of the venture.

The development of this proposal has had a slow gestation because of the complex nature of the joint venture, as well as the need to establish a 'new model' for the interaction between traditional systems of land tenure and the market economy. Some of the key issues to be considered include clarification of social and land tenure aspects, the need to develop a workable interface between traditional systems and the modern market economy, making the proposal attractive to the investor, and ensuring the sustainability of commercial reforestation.

### ***Social and land tenure issues***

The land tenure issues, and the related social relationships, are quite intricate and are gradually being worked out as the project develops. The following discussion highlights some of the key issues involved in working out a viable partnership between a private investor and landowners.

The members of Aqorae community define themselves as the descendants of Aqo, a high chief of the northern part of the Vono Vono Lagoon of East Georgia. The Aqorae community is a sub-group of the larger Aqo-Simaema tribe, the Simaema side of which traces its descent through Aqo's sister, Simaema. As the people of this area follow matrilineal lines of descent, the chiefs of the tribe are descendants of Simaema. After Aqo's death, leadership of the tribe passed from Aqo to Simaema's son Niva (now deceased) and then to his son, Nepia, who resides in a nearby village.

The Aqorae consider themselves a subset of the tribe, principally because they feel that the whole tribe is too large a group to 'control' for the purpose of this project. Moreover, most of the Aqorae community reside in the area and earn their livelihood from the marine and land resources of the area, while most Simaema people live elsewhere, primarily in the urban sector. Significantly, the definition of the Aqorae as a distinct community was first made for this project. The arrangement has been discussed by the whole tribe and obtained a seal of approval from the tribal committee of chiefs. Furthermore, the tribe has the mechanisms to work out any land tenure issues itself and wishes to use customary rules to reach binding agreements rather than the western-style court system.

The Aqo-Simaema tribe is acknowledged to own land on the island of Kohinggo which was granted to them by the Kindu tribe. The boundaries of the Aqo-Simaema land on Kohinggo are well-defined and acknowledged by the Kindu tribe, as demonstrated by the distribution of logging royalties from Kohinggo in the 1980s. The Aqo-Simaema tribe has appointed a land guardian to look after the tribal lands on Kohinggo and has allocated land between members of the family for their use. The Aqorae community has been allocated sufficient land on the island for the proposed project. This allocation has been agreed to by the Council of Chiefs.

### ***The interface between traditional systems and the market economy***

One of the main issues of concern to the investor is the degree to which the communal nature of land tenure poses a risk to the viability of the commercial enterprise. Solomon Island customary land tenure is often seen as a barrier to economic growth. In the past, many businesses have failed because of disputes over land ownership. Solutions have included limiting commercial enterprises to government-owned land (which constitutes only some 13% of the total land area) or pressing for land registration. The latter 'solution' is opposed by many Solomon Island people, who recognise that registration and codification would have negative ramifications on their traditions of resource ownership, community identity and leadership.

The purpose of the CLRFP is to demonstrate a viable alternative: a model for plantation forestry on communal land, funded through a commercial enterprise rather than by government or donors. To be successful, this requires that the landowners are a cohesive and well-defined group of people who have uncontested

user-rights over the demarcated piece of land. Their investment in the enterprise is the use of the land over the life-time of the proposed project, matching the financial investment made by the investor. Success also requires that the interests of the community are protected and that disputes within the community do not jeopardise the whole project. Suitable structures have to be put into place, therefore, to ensure that the interests of all community members are protected.

A number of issues need to be addressed in order to assist the Aqorae community to participate in the joint venture on an equal basis. These issues provide a checklist that would be useful for other commercial ventures involving customary land owners:

- ! The need for a management structure for the community as a partner in the joint venture – involvement in a commercial venture could have potentially divisive effects on the community and it is essential that mechanisms are developed for working out these problems as well as providing a means for equitable participation by men, women and youth in decision making.
- ! Clarification of land user rights – although the land has been allocated to the Aqorae community for their own use, their right to the use of the land needs to be validated through a customary agreement.
- ! The need for the Aqorae community to establish a legal entity to represent them on the board of the joint venture – this legal entity will need to include conflict resolution mechanisms to deal with any disputes over land, the distribution of benefits, etc.
- ! Clarification of the expected benefits from the joint venture and how these are going to be distributed within the community – direct benefits include income from providing labour for plantation operations, a share of stumpage for the community, and training opportunities for community members in managing contract gangs, project management, etc. These benefits should be equitably distributed, especially where individuals benefit directly (from wages and training). It is particularly important that both men and women have equitable access to the benefits.
- ! Community commitment to a unified goal – in order to ensure that all members of the community work towards a unified goal, it will be essential

for the entire community to be better informed and involved in planning and implementation.

- ! Access to training opportunities for men, women and youth – to effectively participate in the joint venture, members of the Aqorae community will need to have training in areas such as project management, small business development skills (eg. for managing contract gangs), and in silvicultural practices.
- ! Selection of the investor to be the joint venture partner – to ensure the success of the project it is essential that an 'ethical' investor is selected who has an understanding of customary land tenure issues, as well as fulfilling other more technical requirements such as having experience of small-scale forestry, marketing, etc.

### ***Security for the investor***

Although the venture should be financially attractive to an investor (the forecast internal rate of return is 15.5%), a number of issues have been identified in the business plan (Hewitson & Massey, 1995), which are crucial to the success of the project:

- ! the venture is based on customary-owned land which has an inherent security as it cannot be sold to other parties, and is a joint undertaking with the landowner, thus helping to ensure commitment;
- ! the day-to-day management is to be undertaken by a company with proven forestry experience in the area and a good record of community liaison;
- ! the project was initiated by the local community and has strong support from both the leaders and the wider community;
- ! access exists to local logging facilities, a nearby port and a secure market;
- ! there is strong support from the Solomon Islands government for the project as it encourages private sector investment in the forestry sector;
- ! there are low overhead costs, including labour and transport.

### ***Sustainability***

Another crucial issue for this project is the sustainability of the reforestation activities in this area. The present proposal is for a plantation for 16 years. It is important, however, that the landowners, with or without external financial

assistance, are then able to continue forestry operations in the area. This may include diversification to other exotic and indigenous species. The sustainability of reforestation requires:

- ! proof that joint ventures are a viable commercial enterprise, of benefit to both landowners and investors;
- ! capacity building for landowners, in forestry practices as well as business management;
- ! equitable distribution of the benefits from joint ventures amongst men and women in the community;
- ! communities able to resolve disputes through traditional systems of decision-making and conflict resolution rather than having to resort to the court systems;
- ! 'ethical' investors able to understand issues of customary land tenure and to work within this framework;
- ! a climate in the Solomon Islands that is conducive to investment by the private sector.

Although this project is still in its infancy, the groundwork already laid provides a solid foundation for further development. A cautious approach has been taken, both because this is uncharted territory for NZODA, and due to its potential to provide a replicable model that can be adapted to other areas in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion in this paper, and especially the description of NZODA experiences with forestry activities in Melanesian countries, highlights the complexities of forestry on customary-owned land. In drawing together the threads of the different aspects of forestry in the South Pacific, some common themes or elements can be identified which may serve as lessons for future activities:

- ! It is important that the needs and priorities of the landowning communities are kept uppermost in the planning and implementation of projects. Unless the landowners and their communities assume ownership of forestry projects, whether for conservation and development or for reforestation, the sustainability of the projects will not be ensured.

- ! Ensuring the ownership of projects by communities will require that donor and government agencies are committed to a participatory approach to project planning and implementation, and a readiness to share project control with the beneficiaries.
- ! Sharing control with communities means that donor agencies, in particular, will have to listen to the communities and understand, respect and accept their world views. As highlighted above, many of the initial teething problems with projects on customary-owned land arise from a lack of appreciation of the differences between cultures with regard to social relationships and attitudes to land and resources.
- ! Working out a harmonious relationship between traditional views about land tenure and resource use, and western concepts of individual property rights, is essential to the success of forestry projects on customary-owned land. Creative and innovative ways to promote that harmony will be needed, rather than attempts to change traditional systems.
- ! Flexibility of approach when dealing with different land tenure systems is crucial. This means that in developing replicable models, key concepts should be transposed rather than details of project design.

This will require allocation of much more time to the identification, appraisal and design stages of projects and the involvement of landowners in the process.

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