

BUILDING VILLAGE CLIMATE RESILIENCE: A VILLAGER'S PERSPECTIVE

**A keynote speech presented at the Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected
Areas in the Pacific**

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By

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Introduction

I had mixed feelings when I was told that there will be more than 800 people attending this 9th Conference on Nature Conservation. Firstly, I was happy that this many people have shown interest in the conference which will undoubtedly result in more conservation action at the national and local levels. However, I was also a bit worried that the increased interest in the conference could be a reflection of the poor state of the environment of our region today. Whatever the case may be, I believe we are all here because we want to share ideas and information that might help us address the challenges that are affecting the sustainable management of our natural resources and biodiversity.

I will be talking to you today in my capacity as a village leader and I hope some of you will understand where I am coming from if what I say does not stand up to the scientific and technical data and information presented here so far. But if I can put away my village hat for a moment, I would like to focus first on where we have come from as a region since the 1985 conference which I had the pleasure of chairing.

In 1985, we focused on identifying the constraints affecting nature conservation in our region. Issues such as the difficulty in applying the national parks concept of IUCN to small islands of the Pacific. We blamed the lack of funding, our limited capacity, lack of understanding and knowledge about our biodiversity and the low priority accorded by our governments to nature conservation for the lack of action in nature conservation at the time.

According to the SPREP Strategic Programme of Action 2004-2009, "lessons from the past 50 years have reaffirmed the need to involve local communities in the protection of critical biodiversity and sustainable management of natural resources". Meeting the social and economic needs of these communities were identified as key to their participation and involvement.

Fast forward to today, and we see that despite the increased involvement by local communities in nature conservation in all countries of our region, the trend in biodiversity loss continues to paint a grim picture for governments and communities in future. The question is: why has the rational arguments for community involvement and economic livelihood failed to achieve biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management we all aspired for 50 years ago? I'll leave you to your own thoughts on the matter but I would like to suggest that: **it is because the argument has now turned and it is no longer just about increased livelihood or saving species and ecosystems; it is also about respecting Pacific culture and religion.**

Success stories from the past

Despite the focus of the 1985 conference on constraints, there are some success stories we could learn from especially during the past 10-15 years. Organisations like SPREP, IUCN, Conservation International and TNC to name a few, have all been very successful in their efforts to engage different sectors in the conservation movement. There have been special training and awareness programmes conducted for the media people, the youth groups, the parliamentarians, the private sector and of course various agencies of governments.

Regional campaigns effectively supported by national efforts have also been launched for the conservation of specific species and ecosystems over the years. For example, we had the Year of the Sea Turtle in 2006, the adoption of the Island Biodiversity Programme of Action during COP 8, we had specific activities for the conservation of dugongs, whales and dolphins, and many PICs have adopted the Convention on Migratory Species, the Pacific Invasive Learning Network (or PILN) and more recently the Ramsar Convention.

Moreover, we note with pride the commitment made by some Pacific States up north through the Micronesian Challenge to protect 30 percent of their near shore and 20 percent of their terrestrial resources by 2020. We also paid tribute to the commitment of the government of Kiribati in creating the largest marine protected area in the Pacific and the third largest in the world.

These efforts and many others during the past few decades have been well documented and acknowledged; they have put the Pacific region on par with other regions of the world who have far greater capacity and resources to achieve their conservation goals. But we must not stop here, there is still a long way to go yet to ensure the achievements of today are not threatened by the challenges of tomorrow. The successes of today should provide us the impetus and courage to continue to move forward. These are lessons we need to take forward, not stored away to be unheard of again as we confront new challenges.

Lessons from the past

Let us revisit our conservation approaches of the past in our to provide new directions for the future.

Until the 1970s, conservation was very much seen as a western concept focusing primarily on the establishment of national parks and protected areas based on the IUCN Protected Area categories and concepts. In the 1980s, we tried to turn this around by advocating for greater community participation in protected area establishment although management of such areas were still firmly held by government agencies. We even changed the name of this conference during this time from The Conference on National Parks and Protected Areas to what it is today.

During the late 1990s and early 2000, a new concept of community-owned and community managed Conservation Areas was promoted largely through the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) as the ideal approach for nature conservation in our region. As you will recall the SPBCP set up 17 CAs in 14 Island countries of the Pacific and although some have since fallen by the wayside, I am pleased to hear that a good number of these 17 CAs are still successfully managed today. I was so happy to see Ian Karika from the Cook Islands being rewarded for his incredible efforts in saving the kakerori from extinction. I hope many more people like Ian and the other champions we celebrated the other night will stand up to lead our conservation efforts in future. The question is: "have we learned from the success of these people and communities in the past"?

Learning from the past

Learning from the past is what I wanted to emphasise in this talk. How can we ensure that what we have learned and achieved over the years are sustained and applied to support future efforts in nature conservation in our region?

Obviously we need to continue raising public awareness and participation in nature conservation initiatives. We also need to provide the scientific and technical information necessary to support our community efforts. But we must also look carefully at how we might best be able to pass on what we know to other people and communities who have so far not shown an interest in what we are doing. For example, we may need to look at different mechanisms and approaches to engaging these people if what we have used in the past have not work. We may also need to look at using other more influential groups (e.g. faith-based groups and village councils) within our societies to help convince these people to join the conservation movement if our conservation agencies have been unable to do so.

The Influence of the Church

I have often spoken about the need to involve as many people and groups as possible in nature conservation initiatives and partnerships. I continue to endorse and support this need. What is disappointing though is the lack of follow up action to make this a reality.

Most if not all our Pacific island countries belong to one religion or another who believe in the sanctity of God's creation -i.e. this world we call home. We all understand from the Bible that it is our duty as human beings and custodians of God's creation to respect and look after this creation for our own good and prosperity. This belief provides a wide open door for Conservation education and awareness to be fully embedded in the teaching of our religious faith. It always make me wonder why the conservation message has not penetrated the thick walls of many of our mainstream churches despite our widespread belief in the beauty and wonders of God's creation.

Referring to my own country, every Samoan belongs to one church group or another, and Church ministers have long been recognised as some of the most influential people in Samoan society. They have the respect of the village people and can influence many village decisions including on the management of the land and marine environment. Sadly, except when asked to say an opening prayer for an environment related activity, church ministers have not been successfully engaged to lead or support village based conservation projects and initiatives in Samoa. I believe the same is true of other Pacific island countries as well. This is tragic because we have this pool of skilled people whom we have not been able to fully utilise sometimes in the mistaken belief that conservation work was below such respected members of society as the church ministers. I would argue that the conservation movement needs all the help it can get including from group leaders such as church ministers and village councils and that we should spare no effort to partner with these community leaders in the pursuit of our conservation goals and objectives.

The role of the village council

The village council is the highest decision-making body for villages in Samoa. It is made up of chiefs and orators (the matais) of the villages.

While the main role of village councils in Samoa is to maintain law and order in the villages, ensuring that all members of the village benefit from the resources of the village land and marine areas is increasingly becoming more prominent. This is made more so by the number of government projects and programs requiring the use of village lands and peoples.

The Savaia village Talomua¹ program was launched by its village council in 1998 to encourage village people to work the land thereby ensuring food security for village families and people. The Talomua programme has since been adopted by the Samoan government as the way to promote agriculture development in Samoa. In the year 2000, the council decided to establish a marine conservation area to protect the village marine environment. With the help of the Samoa Division of Fisheries, by laws for the conservation area were drafted and endorsed by the village council. These have since been officially recognised by the government enabling the village to lay charges on people who offend against the village by-laws. This partnership of village and government has been key to protecting the marine reserve from outsiders who often come from villages that have lost much of their own marine resources either through overuse or lack of village leadership to protect natural resources.

Engaging the church and village councils in conservation work

In a small number of villages in Samoa, church ministers have or are leading village efforts in the management of their natural resources. Backed by the village councils, these efforts are often regarded as successful, firstly in terms of the number of village people participating and secondly in the least amount of resistance observed compared to other developmental projects and programs on village lands.

So what have we learned from the experience of these few villages? At the church level, we need to encourage church leaders to expand their role from preachers of the word to being leaders of conservation groups and projects. We need to inspire them to teach and raise conservation awareness at all levels of the church and to make the link between the gospel and the objectives of our conservation efforts. They need to instil faith in our people that what we are trying to do is indeed consistent with their faith and belief in God's creation. Let us not forget that in some of our Pacific countries like my own, the church turned our people from tribal wars and in some cases cannibalism to be progressive societies that they are today. I am absolutely certain that given the opportunity and necessary support, our church leaders of today can also turn the unconvinced amongst us from destroyers of God's creation to become more responsible and effective custodians of His wonderful creation - our environment.

¹ Talomua is literally translated "The First Taro or Talo." It is an annual agricultural show where village agriculture and marine products are showcased. The Talomua concept has since been adopted by the government as a way to encourage agriculture development at the village and district levels throughout the country.

I have heard some people criticise village councils in Samoa for being notorious in the way they dictate their decisions to the rest of their village people. This may be open to debate, but what I want to say here is that village councils are often led by elders with strong leadership skills and are highly respected by the village people. In many cases, village people do not challenge the decisions of the councils not because they fear the repercussions but, dictatorial or not, because they appreciate the fairness in the way the decision was made taking into account the needs of the whole village, not just a few families.

This can happen to conservation initiatives as well. If we can identify leaders with strong leadership skills (e.g. people like Ian Karika in the Cook Islands and the other "champions" we celebrated the other night) within the communities, then we should try to win these people over to support conservation efforts in our region. They may need some time to accept our modern way of thinking but we could also benefit enormously from their own knowledge and understanding of traditional practices and the way local people adapt to new thinking. Conservation today is a blend of the old and new way of thinking and engaging people with appropriate skills and knowledge to lead these efforts will be key to their success.

Conclusion

Except for the marine environment, the logic for the establishment of large protected areas for the conservation of significant terrestrial ecosystems in Samoa is no longer valid. I say this because communal ownership of land has slowly but steadily been replaced by private ownership placing small plots of lands in the hands of families and even individuals. Given the limited sizes of these possessions, I see the focus of conservation efforts in future to be logically on the protection of one or two species of significant conservation or cultural value. This would naturally require our education and awareness efforts to focus specifically on village, family and individual landowners as opposed to the traditional approach of working through communities and government agencies.

Members and individual landowners are often members of faith-based groups and village councils and bringing our efforts into contact with such leaders and groups who can support and encourage the sustainable management of the resources at the village, family and individual levels can go a long way in the sustainable management of the limited resources we have left on our islands.

In conclusion, I want to say that in our haste to protect what little we have left of our natural resources, let us not forget the important roles that village based faith groups and village councils can play in leading and supporting our efforts. We have seen from the past how effective these groups can be in changing peoples' attitudes and behaviour and it would be a tragic oversight on our part not to call on this pool of expertise to help in our pursuit of biodiversity conservation in our region in future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I agree with previous speakers in saying that the time to act is now. There are no more excuses for inaction. There is more funding now available for nature conservation

and protected areas than ever before. We now have the personnel and technical capacity than we had before, and we also we have appropriate laws and legislation in place to support conservation initiatives. We now know a lot more about our biodiversity than we did several years ago and our Pacific voice has been heard loud and clear by donors and partners all over the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, we now have the means we didn't have before It is now up to us to use these resources effectively to support our conservation goals. All that we need to do now is put our hearts and minds into it, and we will succeed in doing our share in arresting or stopping the degradation of our environment and biodiversity that is happening today. As the children of Savaia are saying in their song in the final slide of this presentation "You can do anything if you put your hearts and minds into it." If Savaia can do it, so can you! There is no better natural solution than having the courage and will to act.

That Ladies and gentlemen is my village perspective.

I wish you a successful conference this week.

Thank you.