

Thursday 5 December 2013  
Suva, Fiji

Keynote Address by the Cook Islands Prime Minister Hon. Henry Puna

***“Sustainable Financing and Sustainable Development”***

**Salutations**

**Introduction**

Please allow me to extend a warm Kia Orana/BulaVinaka to our hosts, the Government and the people of Fiji, for the warm welcome and kind hospitality provided to us all on the occasion of this 9<sup>th</sup> Pacific Islands Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas. It is a pleasure to join you all at this gathering, to get re-acquainted, and present some perspectives on the Cook Islands’ experience, as they relate to our theme today and the inter-connected nature of the issues involved in ‘Nature Conservation and Protected Areas’.

Over the past several years, the Cook Islands has made considerable progress in instituting and initiating change for the benefit of the long term sustainability of our natural environment. The Cook Islands has not been alone in these efforts. As you would have discussed over the past few days, as a Region, the Pacific has been very active in its campaign to promote sustainability and the need to safeguard our future by working towards establishing robust policies and clear frameworks of cooperation.

The foundations to move forward with cautious development and how we use our natural resources should be firmly embedded in our approach to secure long-term benefits and fruitful partnerships. There is a balance in this approach and I am pleased to say that at the political level, we are increasingly asked to strengthen our stance on the conservation of our natural environment through increased public awareness and pressure and a positive outlook.

In recent years, I have taken this approach onboard and utilised every opportunity to extend these messages further afield. During my tenure as Chairman of the Forum for example, I promoted widely not just our predicament of vulnerability and the on-going constraints in financial and human resources, but that the Pacific as a Region was in fact demonstrating new levels of leadership in presenting our case, our arguments, our agenda, to the rest of the world.

Our examples of cooperation and initiatives to conserve, protect, and sustain, have made headlines everywhere. We are accomplishing a great deal in our part of the world but oftentimes that goes unrecognised or downplayed in the broader spectrum of global concerns. And we should put that right and say something about it. We can lead by example no matter what our size, no matter how our political clout may be measured by

others. Alongside our right to be prosperous and aspire, is our need to adhere to what is best for us on our own terms.

Political will is an important starting point and I'd like to reinforce the necessity of having this support in place to help drive the planning and implementation of our conservation initiatives.

In terms of Renewable Energy and the transformation of our power use, for instance, political will has been a vital starting point in establishing national priorities, targets, roadmaps, and development projects. Improved levels of Energy Security will better define the merits of our collective approach and gain much needed relief from the debilitating influences and harmful impacts of fossil fuel, right across the Pacific.

I am confident that even in the face of daunting local conditions and ambitious targets, we will succeed in breaking down the barriers to economic growth and demonstrating leadership in the clean and green Region we want this to be.

Although the least responsible for the causes of Climate Change, the Cook Islands and other Small Islands Developing States are consistently presenting convincing, high-impact cases for investment in clean technologies. The conversion to renewables will free up resources and strengthen our resolve for the sustained management of our environment, irrespective of our individual levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

We've had our set-backs and delays and there's no doubt that mere planning and the best of intentions are not enough. Uppermost is our objective to secure and sustain the necessary financing partnerships that will support sustained development in the Energy sector. The ability to re-direct financial resources away from volatile fossil fuels will provide added support to those partnerships and build more effective and longer-term management regimes for environmental preservation programmes.

Initiatives in renewable energy and the reinforcement of regional cooperation in energy security are part of our success stories – the stories that need to be told because they are clear examples of Pacific leadership at work, uplifting and motivational, and not beholden to anyone's ideals but our own, first and foremost.

These are our foundations and our platforms. Positive success stories to promote and share with each other and the rest of the world give us a sense of optimism that can rise above the constraints and the difficulties. We can and must build on progress, and allow the gains to become part of who we are and what we have to offer.

The establishment of a Marine Protected Area in the Southern EEZ of the Cook Islands is testimony to the collaborative nature of internal consultation processes and how this national approach can be translated into broader regional cooperation and the building of beneficial partnerships.

Setting aside 1 million square kilometres which will be under a new regime of sustainable management was guided by the wisdom of traditional leaders and the balancing

perspectives of non-state actors, who added value to a coalition of common thinking and a unified vision. Traditional leaders and non-state actors remain a key element to our processes which is representative of how close-knit partnerships between government and stakeholders can generate goodwill and confidence.

Earlier this year, I was grateful for the opportunity to participate alongside our good friends in New Caledonia and promote more widely our Marine Protected Area and oceanic models for the sustainable management and use of our natural resources. Oceania 21 and its concept of regional cooperation for marine conservation cuts across political lines and forms a positive platform from which to engage with France and other metropolitan powers in Europe, particularly in advance of 2015 and the UNFCCC COP15 in Paris.

I have been consistently encouraging and supportive of Oceania 21 for it does present an excellent opportunity to work across the regional divide of individual status and position. The need to preserve our way of life in the Pacific has no such boundaries. We're in this together. And we're finding the solutions together.

Nature Conservation and Protected Areas are perhaps our most dramatic examples of our ability to find solutions with broad consultation, regional cooperation, and strengthened political will.

Over the years, the Cook Islands has succeeded in re-establishing bird populations in the Outer Islands and Rarotonga. One such success is the story of kakerori – the endemic Rarotonga fly catcher. In 1989 there were 29 individuals of kakerori left and was predicted to be extinct by 1999 if no actions were taken. In 1989 it was listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List. As a result the Cook Islands Government, New Zealand Government, SPREP and local land owners formed a partnership to establish a 2.6 square kilometres of the Takitumu Protected Area to give the kakerori a chance to survive. In 2001, kakerori numbers had increased to 209. In 2005, 255 and in 2009, 330. Today, the program is self-sustaining generating its income from guided tours, and funds generated are invested back into program. The success of the program is due to good partnerships built on the belief that the kakerori needed to be saved and the generosity of the landowners in establishing the protected area.

The kakerori example is one where localised protective areas have flourished under localised leadership with a seamless integration of cultural ties and environmental conservation. I am pleased that the person instrumental in this initiative has received recognition in the form of the Pacific Islands Environment Leadership Award for his work and contributions, which overlay the fields of native bird preservation, regulatory oversight, and traditional voyaging. We are extremely proud of Ian Karika.

This effortless binding together of inter-connected interests helps demonstrate the extent to which the motivation of localised leadership can translate into broader practicalities for the benefit of the community.

It also emphasizes and justifies the need for integration, of conservation with developments across all sectors. Our tourism destination development strategy is another example of

integration and where the benefits are spread across sectors and amongst a widerange of stakeholders. Maximising economic returns from tourism has become the catalyst for flora and fauna conservation to support tourist nature watching, nature tours and walks.

In Rarotonga, restoring the health of the lagoon because of its significance to tourism spurred New Zealand to support the replacement of household sanitation systems in our most tourism concentrated area. The success of this program and its linkages to better health and improved livelihood outcomes has also acted as a stimulus for the European Union to lend their support to our sanitation transformation programme.

Integration produces added value, diminishes trade-offs, produces co-benefits and generates an attractive product that development partners are willing to support. In the Cook Islands context, we are confident that existing financial mechanisms and oversight can provide the robust vehicles needed to support beneficial partnerships over the long term. Moreover, these existing systems have a proven accountability and supervision record to facilitate and sustain aid flows with transparency.

Any discussion on sustainable financing for sustainable development will not be complete without consideration of payment by the user of nature's goods and services. In this regard, I congratulate Palau for its Green Fee initiative - a home grown financing solution to fund its conservation efforts. This is Pacific innovation at work. It also presents a model for the way sustainable financing must be integrated with our approach toward building policy and shaping management frameworks.

It is my belief that there is potential for increasing private sector financing and support for environment conservation and management and that these possibilities need to be explored and tried. Enabling conditions need to be defined and established.

The discourse on sustainable finance for sustainable development requires us to build on our success, to relook at our failures, repackage our approach, to change the way in which we value our environment and in doing so value ourselves as individuals, countries and as the Pacific.

Action must come alive at the individual level – through work and everyday living. At the country level, our development policies should aim at promoting an inclusive green based economy which will strengthen human well-being, social equality and environment sustainability. This is why we need to urgently change our lifestyles – to accomplish high human development within the carrying capacity of nature.

This is within our control. Changing the world is not within our control and we should not be caught up in trying to do so. Effective change starts at home. Let's change our lot and when the world sees this perhaps it too can follow our lead.

On that note, I wish you well in your deliberations. We need an action orientated way forward that will allow us to achieve what is best for our environment, for us and on our own terms. We need progressive actions in marine and ocean management; ridge to reef development management; climate change and minimising its impacts; revitalisation of

native flora and fauna; elimination of invasive species; capacity building; sustainable financing and advocating for a change in mind-sets, attitudes, behaviours towards conservation that creates buy-in and ownership; I guarantee you as a Pacific Leader you will have my support.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia