

# NATIONAL PARKS

## Seeking a South Pacific way

by Iosefatu Reti



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heritages can be best protected for the benefit and enjoyment of their people.

### The national park concept

National parks were defined and adopted by the General Assembly of IUCN in New Delhi in 1969 as follows:

**"A National Park is a relatively large area,**

- **where one or several ecosystems are not materially altered by human exploitation and occupation, where plant and animal species, geomorphological sites and habitats are of special scientific, educative and recreative interest or which contains a natural landscape of great beauty and,**
- **where the highest competent authority of the country has taken steps to prevent, or to eliminate as soon as possible, exploitation or occupation in the whole area and to enforce effectively the respect of ecological, geomorphol-**

area" criterion will prevent countries which are anxious to implement nature conservation programmes from doing so either because they could not justify in financial terms setting aside large areas for national parks, or the areas available are not large enough.

Although this may vary from country to country, an area of 1000 hectares has been widely accepted as the minimum size of a national park. This immediately places our small island nations at a disadvantage in view of our limited land areas. It would be in the interest of the small islands to be more flexible in this respect.

### Conflicts could result

National parks are a relatively new concept and are therefore little understood, especially in the South Pacific. In Western Samoa, and many other Pacific countries, most of the land is held under customary ownership with the chiefs (matai) having the sole right and authority for control and use of the land. Thus the preservation of these areas for national parks or for any other use without prior agreement by

### Traditional use of land

Perhaps the most common problem of conservation programmes is attributed to the traditional use of land. Shifting cultivation by subsistence farmers has been identified as a continuing danger to protected areas and has been outlawed in such areas.

Admittedly, the people's need for food deserves the highest consideration and wherever possible this priority use of land is encouraged. Hence in selecting areas for conservation purposes, this need should always be borne in mind.

In our small island nations in the South Pacific, conserving huge areas may appear to undermine the desire for agricultural development and the need to sacrifice one for the other without compromise appears to be unavoidable. Unfortunately for conservation, it is often the protection of land that is sacrificed in favour of development. Ironically enough, the restrictions implicit in the definitions of national parks which often prevent compromises to be made, is in many cases the very reason for voting against conservation.