

# Protected natural areas in the South Pacific

**Birandra Singh is the conservation officer for the Fiji National Trust. This article is an edited version of his keynote address on the Pacific to the World Conference on National Parks held in Bali in 1982.**



A river fisherman on New Caledonia's forested east coast. Traditional conservation practices in fisheries and forest gathering allowed Pacific peoples to live in harmony with their environment for generations. That balance is now changing. *Photo: Guy Salmon*

As was common to most societies in the pre-industrial era, the inhabitants of the many islands in the Pacific Ocean had a pattern of living dependent very much on the coastal or terrestrial resources that were available to them at the time. The coastal dwellers were natural swimmers and seamen, which aided them to reap harvests from the seas and reefs. Micronesians were the only Oceanian people who did deep sea fishing.



Ranger Kolati Poai at the O Le Pupu-Pu'e National Park information centre fale, Samoa.

*Photo: Mark Bellingham*

Islanders living along waterways towards the middle of islands developed methods of obtaining game from the forests, including pigs (probably originally introduced by the early arrivals on the islands), birds and large lizards. Both coastal and inland peoples also practised slash and burn agriculture — primarily growing rootcrops and leaving the land fallow after harvest — and collected fruits and root crops growing wild near the settlements.

## Conservation through "taboo"

Enough examples can be given to illustrate that there was a great tradition of conservation practice in the Pacific, especially through the use of "taboo" areas or practices; these taboo systems had extraordinary socio-religious power. No doubt there were exceptions but these probably depended on the availability of plentiful supplies in relation to the size of human population. Where population pressures were high, the natural environment was destroyed, e.g. grasslands of Marquesas, Papua New Guinea and western Viti Levu (Fiji). In Fiji we also know that some bird species including a pigeon were hunted to extinction in the 18th century. The prehistoric inhabitants of the Pacific islands practised intelligent conservation, and used technologies adequate for those times; but they also depended on the sanctions of social customs to be successful.

During the past century, as visits to this region increased with arrivals from Europe and Asia, a commercial value was established for almost all resources. The introduction of new methods of transportation and communication also brought the indigenous inhabitants of this region in contact with new ideas, styles of living and technologies for resource use. This has affected and will undoubtedly continue to affect the traditional conservation concepts in the future. Even if the intentions of the new arrivals were good, their end result has been the slow eradication of traditional practices that maintained the delicate balances between humanity and nature. Tourism, industrialization and the introduction of intensive agricultural systems based on exotic species of plants and

animals are bringing about far-reaching changes.

The rapid deforestation of the higher islands that has taken place is a major concern to scientists, conservationists and other inhabitants of this realm. The forests on quite a number of islands are being extracted for export earnings; mines on different islands are fast removing the mineral wealth of the islands. Records show an increase in fish catch every year



Fiji's rare endemic crested iguana was recently protected in a sanctuary on Nadua Taba Island, with the co-operation of nearby villagers. *Photo: Paddy Ryan*

with the introduction of modern fisheries technologies. The rapid increase in tourism in the region has also led to modifications and alterations in the landscape and seascape of the coastal areas. The increase in population has created a demand for more lands for settlements and therefore removal of forests or reclamation of swamps (mangroves), involving quite large earthworks. Some of the changes may be necessary to respond to people's