

PACIFIC TROPICAL RAINFORESTS

What can be done to save them?

By Guy Salmon

Most of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific still live close to their forests. They know their forests well and love being in them.

Very often the outsider coming to a remote village and seeking permission to explore the surrounding forest will be assigned two or more young men of the village as guides. A deep sense of courtesy and concern for one's safety (and perhaps also a desire to watch what the visitor is up to) seems to be the motivating spirit for this practice. A reciprocal gesture of a gift is therefore very appropriate.

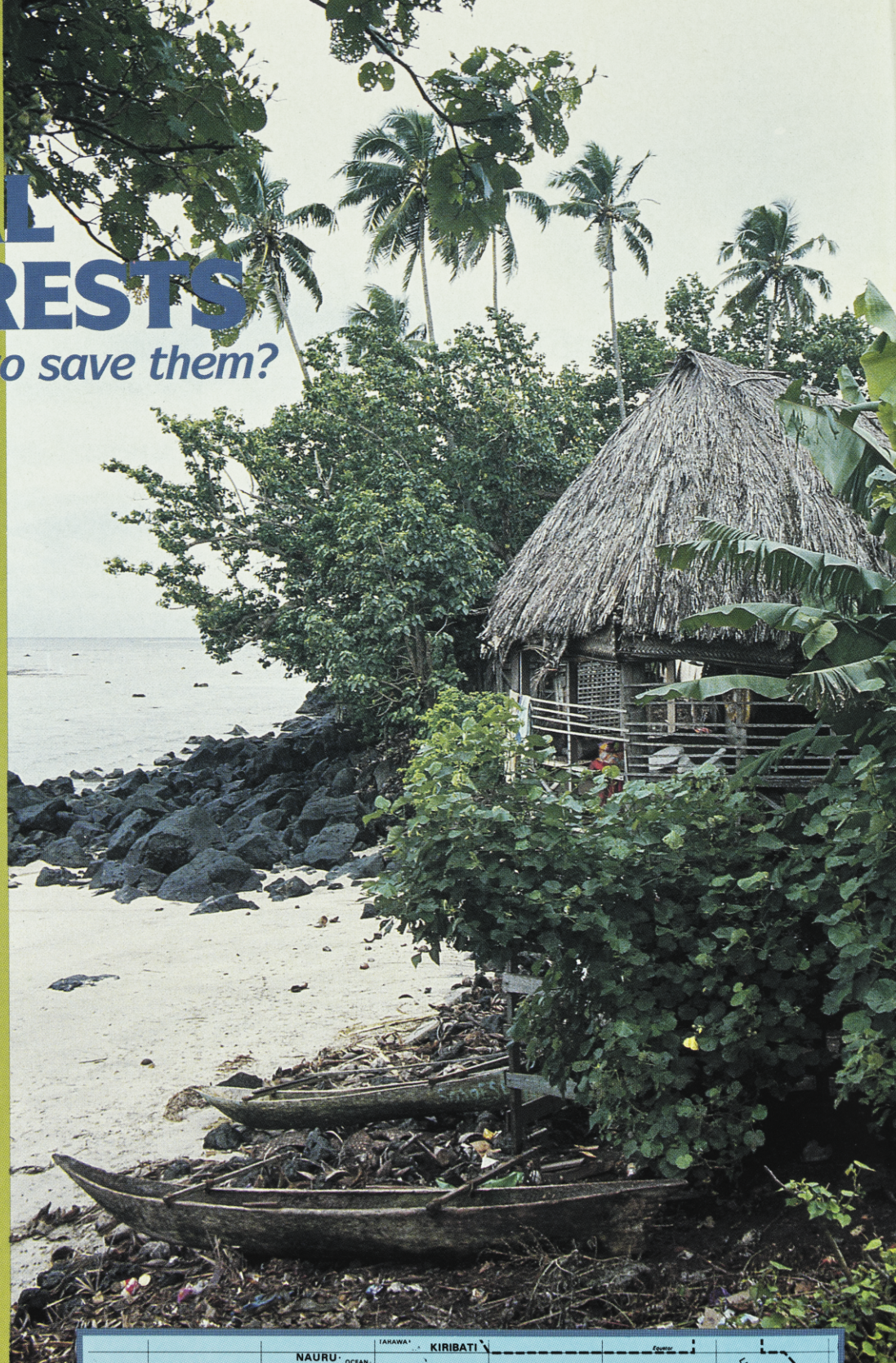
Whatever the reasons for their assignment, there is no mistaking the enjoyment of these young people at simply being in the forest; nor their familiarity with the forest world.

Absorbing its richness

It is not just a question of knowing the tracks and routes, the edible fruits and birds, and the plants useful for medicine or building materials, although these things are all obviously important to their way of life. There is more to it than that. A seemingly endless knowledge of the traditional names of numerous plants and animals, and a keen appreciation of beauty in the forest; tells of a people who spend much time in contemplation in the forest, and who have absorbed its richness into their own being.

In the strangely scented luxuriance of the tropical forest — across all the barriers of language and culture — there grows a gradual mutual recognition: that we are each conservationists. It is that recognition, reinforced several times in the backblocks of Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia, that gives this particular conservationist a lot of hope about the development of conservation action in the South Pacific.

Yet a grassroots conservation spirit in the village communities is far from being the only force at work in the Pacific. In the villages themselves, rapid population growth in recent years has dramatically increased the need for land clearing for growing food — throwing the people into an unsustainable relationship with their surrounding forests. And the lure of wealth and modernity seen in the cities — and among the tourists — has sharpened the desire for modern material goods and



Map of the South Pacific