

granadilla, coffee, manioc, bombax.

Rarotonga's glory

But the glory of Rarotonga is in its central crown of forest, with the panorama to be scanned in the half-day's cross-island walk.

A million years ago, Rarotonga's high cone of basalt collapsed at the middle, to leave a central caldera, with a jagged rim around which other vents were to erupt. One of these, after erosion, has left its dense crater plug, as the tall-standing Needle ('Te Rua Manga').

I first made the climb to the base of the Needle, then down to the opposite coast, with my old friend and student, Gerald McCormack. For the Education Department of Tonga, he is researching and interpreting the reef and plant biology of the Cooks.



Pacific Islands such as Samoa offer much to the tourist interested in natural history. The Togitogiga Recreation Reserve was set aside in 1978. A IUCN/UNDAT scientific team has recommended that 6 percent of Western Samoa's land area be reserved as national parks. Photo: Mark Bellingham

Cool enough at most times of year, the climb up to the crown, starts from Avarua town centre, following the clear stream up the Avatiu valley to the power station. Right to the Needle, progress is easy by grasping the root plexus of the lovely, complete canopy of *Inocarpus* chestnut trees. The beach hibiscus ('au') remains a common tree right to the top. The lower canopy has its own tree diversity: *Homalium*, *Macaranga*, *Bischofia*, *Cecropia*, and of course a host of rubiaceans: scented white *Gardenia*, and *Morinda* vine, and — in drier places — *Mussaenda*.

There are genera familiar from New Zealand, but never with the bewildering species wealth of Fiji. Thus Rarotonga has its one only, *Myrsine* and *Pittosporum*, and — at upper levels — its own *Weinmannia*. There are lots of shrubby *Piper* and perching *Peperomia*. A *Meryta* species, — smaller than our own — is agreeably common.

Reaching down the high ridges into the shaded gulleys, is a novel tree of Rarotonga's own, discovered by Cheeseman and

named by him *Fitchia speciosa*. It is a fast growing composite, with big, glossy leaves and large pendent heads, like orange-tipped globe artichokes.

At the high levels and on craggy places, is Rarotonga's pohutukawa, a form of the Pacific-wide *Metrosideros collina*. Already in August, crimson tufts were showing. With its delicate pink leaf buds, this makes a charming tub-plant at Auckland sea-level.

Through all the Cook Islands, bird species are few. Round the villages, the 'government bird' mynah is as common as a sparrow. The forests have a Rarotongan fruit dove, a starling and a rare flycatcher Gerald McCormack is studying. Our own long-tailed cuckoo is there as well.

Right up to the Needle come also birds from the sea: Ivory white and the most ethereal of all sea-birds, is the white tern



The unusual Rarotongan tree, *Fitchia speciosa*, is fast growing with large heads like orange-tipped globe artichokes. Photo: Ewen Cameron

or 'pirako'. High overhead are white, tropic birds 'rakoa' with forked tails like a slender marlin spike.

Tourism: the island way

The Cook Islands have dollar parity with New Zealand and Rarotonga enjoys a direct flight to Auckland. It is coming up to the tourist pretensions of Fiji. With sand, sunshine and blue water — swimming pools, duty free shopping, golf and riding, ethnic cuisine (and Rotary meetings at the 'Rarotongan' resort), tourism is flourishing. Development money is being actively enticed.

A 250-bed resort is being envisaged at Amuri village on the incomparable Aitutaki Atoll. The carrying capacity (ecological, psychological, social and, most practical, sewage disposal), will break under such strain.

Heritage still intact

In the Cook Islands it is not too late to discover the old heritage, of which big pieces are still intact. Even in Fiji, there are a few places where forests have not been timber-ravaged; where mangroves have not been cut for firewood, or torn out for marinas; and reefs that haven't been ransacked for commercial dealers.

For Rarotonga, as it still authentically is, there could be increasing earnings from discerning tourism. There are people today in the Cooks who realise this well. One could be the Rarotongan Wickham Exham, whose half-day tour of the island shouldn't be missed. A home-educated resource economist, he drives his tour minibus like a modern-day William Cobbett. His 'rural ride' tells us about history and customs, horticulture and economy. At \$15 a head, the package tour ends with a superb traditional meal served by his wife Maria, in their garden with bird of paradise plants, starfruit, *Spathodea*, Bombax, cotton and lychee trees.

To grasp the truth about the Cook Islands will need just this kind of interpretation and revelation. The best sort of aid New Zealand might give could be a biology or ecology-based 'green corps'. This could carry forward the work and spirit of the old peace corps. It would need good insight, and capable writing: different and indigenous for each of the Pacific nations. Even for their separate islands, as Gerald McCormack is today doing on Rarotonga.

Complex tropical forests

Rain forests left intact could one day bring the same incitement to tourism as the reefs and snorkelling grounds. Complexly layered and stratified into their profusion of habitat space, reefs and tropical forests are the most complex communities on the planet: every fragment of them living, or the product of life.

But visitors should want to know the names and lives of their inhabitants. An uninstructed snorkel dive, a glass-bottomed boat cruise, or a forest walk without names is a voyeurist experience soon forgotten. If we are to understand these places fully, we must be wrestling with Tane and Tangaroa, to seek the names of their children of the forest and sea, just as Jacob wrestled with Israel's God until day-break to find out his supreme Name.

As any tourist can realise on a Sunday morning, Cook Islanders have been deeply Christian people, with a spiritual base of awareness that in our developed world seems superseded and lost.

As big a question as any that faces these new nations, must be whether their island Christianity can teach the lesson not of exploitative development but of the Franciscan understanding that gives to the natural order its mystical and ethical due.

These people could be like Naboth of Jazreel who owned a vineyard (1 King, 21, 1-5). King Ahab pressed him:

'Give me your vineyard to add to my vegetable garden. I will give you a better vineyard for it, or if you prefer, I will give you its worth in money'. But Ahab answered him: 'God forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors'.