

The South Pacific biodiversity conservation programme

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CONSERVATION in the South Pacific Islands is being given a major shot in the arm, through the launching of the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP), a five-year programme that is now getting underway. Funded to a total of US\$10,000,000 through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as part of the Global Environment Facility, and with promised co-financing from the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau to an amount of A\$2,500,000, the SPBCP will be managed in concert with Pacific Island countries by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) from its new headquarters in Apia, Western Samoa.

"This project intends to protect biological diversity within a number of Pacific Islands by facilitating the establishment of a series of large, diverse Conservation Area Projects or CAPs (terrestrial, marine and combined) in which there are agreed criteria for development based on long-term ecological sustainability. Emphasis is on assisting local partnerships to develop sustainable management structures for biodiversity conservation. Ancillary activities, linked to specified CAPs where possible, include information dissemination, training attachments, species protection and action-oriented conservation policy analysis.

"The emphasis is on facilitating local communities, NGOs and government agencies to establish together viable management systems for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. The lead facilitating role for each CAP will be held by an agency of national, provincial or local government, a land-holding group or local community, a local or international conservation NGO, or a consortium of the above. There will be a bias toward facilitating models which achieve concrete outputs and which are likely

to be replicable in other areas within the region. These models will have been well tested and documented by the end of the programme."²

A total of fourteen Pacific Island countries are eligible for direct support from the programme: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. Other SPREP country members will be able to participate in the SPBCP from other sources or through exchanges of services, while Papua New Guinea is the recipient of a separate GEF biodiversity allocation.

The final project document was completed after some fairly extensive consultation in the region, which included two workshops, one in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in October 1991, and the other in Apia, Western Samoa, in July 1992. The immediate programme objectives are:

1. "To facilitate establishment and initial management by local communities, NGOs and government agencies, of a series of Conservation Areas that demonstrate protection of biodiversity, ecologically sustainable use of natural resources, and community economic development."
2. "To protect terrestrial and marine species that are threatened or endangered in the Pacific region."
3. "Identification of new areas that are important for the conservation of biological diversity, and are potential Conservation Areas in the participating countries."
4. "Improved awareness in Pacific Island countries of the importance and means of conserving biological diversity."

5. "Improved capacities of co-operation between different sectors of society and agencies contributing to the conservation of the biological diversity of the Pacific Islands."

The importance and urgency of establishing mechanisms to conserve the fragile biodiversity of the Pacific Islands cannot be over emphasized. Given the substantial funding being provided under the SPBCP, the question to be asked is whether the project is formulated in a way that will enable the participating countries to sustain the initiatives over the longer term. The conservation of biodiversity must, after all, be permanent if it is going to have any meaning: biological systems do not work in five-year cycles. The sustainability of this project is a question that has been on many minds during the review process, since so little is known about biodiversity in the Pacific Islands, there is very little resident expertise in biodiversity, and the various national governments have small staffs and very limited resources, being dependent on aid funding for projects of this kind. The stated SPBCP approach is to "... use conservation areas to protect critical habitats and develop sustainable use and development practices concurrently, the logic being that it is better to act quickly to develop effective models with the best of the working knowledge available."

It should be incumbent on all ecologists, systematists, resource managers, government officials and educators in the Pacific Island nations to ensure that, after the five-year term of this project, its initiatives do not disappear over the horizon when the money runs out.

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²Extract from Project Document: August 1992. Prepared by the Preparatory Assistance Team, Ioeseatu Reti, Peter Hunnam, Peter Thomas and Peter Johnson.