
‘WHERE’S OUR DEVELOPMENT?’

Landowner aspirations and environmentalist agendas in Western Solomon Islands

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s a number of large, globally influential environmental organisations attempted to encourage Melanesian landowners to come to a ‘compromise’ between hands-off conservation and unsustainable ‘development’, through a variety of ‘Integrated Conservation and Development’ (ICAD) experiments (Ellis 1997; McCallum and Sekhran 1997; Filer with Sekhran 1998:263-77; Van Helden 1998:1-6). The idea was generally to try to lure landowners away from embracing highly destructive — but relatively lucrative — industrial developments, primarily round-logging operations, which were, and still are, almost entirely controlled by powerful and unscrupulous multinational companies. The strategy for getting landowners to eschew logging generally took the form of first, convincing them of the ‘value’ of the biodiversity that they were saving by not allowing their rainforests to be logged, and second, offering various forms of assistance and incentives for embarking on alternative, ecologically and economically sustainable development ventures such as ecoforestry and ecotourism. The design of these community-based alternative developments tended to assume the existence of a certain level of cooperative behaviour — underpinned by communitarian attitudes or notions of ‘public good’ — that are not necessarily present in the social organisation of these communities. I wish to examine the values of conservationists and landowners regarding biodiversity, as well as the mismatch between conservationist expectations of communitarianism and some of the social realities I observed while working with communities in the Western Solomon Islands.

Between April 1999 and May 2001 I was employed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF — formerly called the World Wildlife Fund) for the final two years of a five-year ‘conservation and development’ project. In 1995, the WWF South Pacific Program initiated the ‘Solomon Islands Community Resource Conservation and Development Project’ (SI-CRCDP, hereinafter referred to as ‘the project’) in the Western Province of Solomon

Islands. The project was administered from the provincial capital of Gizo and had a network of 13 ‘field officers’ spread across three ‘localities’:

- ‘Gizo Islands’ area (Gizo, Vella Lavella, Ranongga and Simbo);
- South-West Choiseul; and
- Marovo Lagoon.

The project employed twenty-two staff and operated on a budget of around US\$240,000 per year. While the project design appeared to have much to recommend it (most notably that the field officers worked within their own language groups), and had chalked up some significant achievements, the actual implementation of the project proved to be quite problematic. It experienced chronic and occasionally spectacular management problems, particularly in the early and middle stages of the project. These included gross mismanagement of project funds by at least one of the finance managers, and disillusionment and dissatisfaction voiced by most of the field staff (especially with regard to communication difficulties and lack of feedback from management staff).

Representatives of several of the project’s ‘partner communities’ also expressed dissatisfaction and cynicism, invariably because of the perceived lack of emphasis on the ‘development’ part of the CRCDD formula. The project also alienated key counterparts within the Solomon Islands government in its early stages. The mid-term review (Chung and Russell 1998) was scathing, and few of the recommendations of that review had been heeded by the time I joined the project in early 1999. In this paper I review the design and implementation of the project, and will focus on some of the social and economic issues that underpin the obvious conflicts between Western environmentalist agendas and the aspirations of rural Solomon Islanders.

The overall objective of the project, as stated in its logical framework, was ‘to conserve and protect the natural environment and biodiversity of Solomon Islands by assisting customary resource owners to meet their development needs through the ecologically, socially and economically sustainable use of their natural resources.’ This objective was broken down into four elements or ‘components’:

1. To increase understanding amongst customary resource owners of the need for conservation and their role in effective community resource management.
2. To assist participating communities to adopt sound natural resource management practices by providing relevant resource materials, training opportunities, facilitation and technical assistance.

3. To assist participating communities to design, implement and monitor specific sustainable resource conservation and development ventures that meet their development needs and serve as demonstrations of effective rural development.
4. To establish mechanisms for continuing support of community-based conservation and resource management by strengthening the skills and capabilities of local institutions.

According to the project's designers, these four components were meant to flow on from each other in a more or less logical sequence. The 'awareness' component assumes that merely by conveying 'information' about the ecological relationships of certain forest, reef and wetland species, the landowners will automatically adopt an environmentalist-like fervour for biodiversity conservation, which will trigger a natural progression to the planning and sustainable development components (cf. Filer with Sekhran 1998:322). The fourth component, also frequently referred to as 'capacity building', basically translates as 'training' of the community members managing the venture, as well as members of other local organisations, committees, or governing bodies. The training is usually aimed at areas such as organisational development, business management, and accounting. There were of course stark differences between the rhetoric and the reality of the above main and subsidiary objectives, some of which I will examine below.

While there are some parallels between WWF's project in the Western Solomon Islands and other ICAD projects in Papua New Guinea, the former in fact operated on a more dispersed scale than the large protected area ('Wildlife Management Area') projects in Papua New Guinea. In practice the project tried to influence and assist a scattered network of 'partner communities'. However the social scale of the operation was never articulated in the project's Logical Frameworks or Activity Plans beyond the terms 'community' or 'land-owning group'. In the project's reports, plans, log-frames, and internal communications, the term 'community' is most often synonymous with 'village', but occasionally refers to clan groups of various sizes. The vagueness and ambiguity of the term 'community', with its readily romanticised overtones of consensus and united action, precludes sound analysis of the population groups to be dealt with and assumes solidary interests that are often non-existent (Carrier 1981; Rodman 1987; Schoeffel 1997). In this paper I will demonstrate that it is this lack of real social analysis of host 'communities' that hinders the success of environmentally oriented development work in the Solomons. A thorough socio-cultural investigation would illuminate divergent interests and identify areas of possible tension over resource management among community members, and the

implications this has for conservation-and-development work (for example, Van Helden 1998:90-92).

PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PROJECT STAFF AND LANDOWNERS

The primary complaint directed at the project by its partner communities was that there was not enough emphasis on the 'Venture Development' component and too much emphasis on the 'Awareness and Information' component. This indicates a number of communication problems, the most significant of which is an apparent insensitivity on the part of the Western architects, sponsors, and certain (expatriate) managers of the project to the development aspirations of both the rural people they are trying to influence, and the nation as a whole. Many conservationists still adhere to romantic notions of rural Melanesians as people who are satisfied with their subsistence lifestyle, have limited material and financial aspirations, and are not annoyed by the enormous gulf between their own level of affluence and that of the foreign conservationists, consultants and tourists (and the colonial masters before them) whom they interact(ed) with on a regular basis.

It goes without saying that relatively few conservationists have actually spent significant amounts of time living that same subsistence lifestyle, much less learning the language, culture and values of the people they are trying to influence (see also Ellis 1997:7). Rural people throughout Solomon Islands are invariably highly enthusiastic about participating in the cash economy, and frustrated by the slow pace of 'development'. The intense competition, ambition and jealousy commonly seen at all levels (individual, family, subclan, clan) of Melanesian society (Van Helden 1998:91-92), described by Filer (Filer with Sekhran 1998:122), as the 'politics of envy', is clearly relevant in global as well as local contexts. A significant fraction of the population obviously aspire to the same level of wealth as the foreigners they meet from affluent, industrialised nations, and such aspirations have been clearly observable since colonial times, as evidenced by Lawrence's (1964:1) description of the rationale behind what he called the 'New Guinea cargo cult': 'It expresses its followers' dissatisfaction with their status in colonial society, which is to be improved imminently or eventually by the acquisition of new wealth.'

The reactions of landowners are therefore understandable when they are beseeched by conservationists not to sign logging contracts that would give them their only conceivable chance at a taste of that wealth. This frustration is thus articulated (to the project) with what Van Helden (1998:6) refers to as 'conservation blackmail': 'If you don't provide us with an "alternative

development", we will go ahead with logging' (see also Filer 1997). The WWF project in Western Solomons assisted with three such alternative developments: the ecotourist lodge¹ near Michi Village in Marovo Lagoon, called 'Vanua Rapita', and two women's sewing projects, one in Roviana Lagoon, the other in Southern Vangunu Island. But the project worked in a large number of villages, and while other ventures were started in several other locations, none of these were operational by the completion of the project.

The other side of the above complaint by the partner communities is the overemphasis on 'Awareness and Information' campaigns. This complaint was also levelled at a number of other conservation-oriented NGOs. It is in fact a more complex issue, encompassing issues of language and expatriate conservationist assumptions about the need for (and efficacy of) the enlightenment and education of rural Melanesians in Western scientific understandings of ecological balance, species depletion and the desirability of conserving the natural environment. Filer (Filer with Sekhran 1998:322-3) robustly critiques the blind faith in the power of conservation 'awareness' work on a number of fronts. Here I wish to focus on some problems with it that I encountered consistently within the context of the project. Important differences in the values of Western environmentalist organisations and rural Solomon Islands landowners, not to mention the local project staff, who have to mediate between them, mean that there was plenty of scope for communication problems. The design of the project appears on the surface at least to have dealt with the problem of language. And in fact it did, to a large extent. There are seven languages spoken in the various localities embraced by the project, and the project employed at least one field officer from each of these language groups. Most of the field officers spoke, read and wrote passable English, but none were fluent. None of the expatriate staff who worked on the project had ever been fluent in a local language. 'Awareness and Information' materials were typically generated in English, and sometimes translated into local languages by the field officers. This is a system that sometimes worked quite well, as far as *delivery* of the 'message'. Nevertheless there remained significant communication barriers between expatriate staff and field officers at times, but these were not as serious a problem as the *content* of the 'message'. For the concepts that are fundamental to environmental conservation ideals entail understandings of the origins and evolution of the natural world, and of the interrelationships that can sustain it, that are often incompatible with Melanesian ideas of the world they inhabit.

WHAT VALUE BIODIVERSITY?

The project's goal assumes some overlap between ecologically, socially and economically sustainable resource use and the development aspirations of rural landowners. However the standard pattern of 'development' in the Western Province and elsewhere in the Solomons gives little support to this assumption. The nature of the mismatches between conservationist rhetoric and the aspirations of rural people, realised or not, have never been subject to any detailed analysis anywhere in the project's policy documents, 'toolkits' or planning processes. This is despite a mandate to hire a social scientist in the project's original contract (which was never done), and considerable criticism of the project's lack of attention to social issues in the mid-term review (Chung and Russell 1998).

The value accorded to biodiversity by conservation-minded (and usually scientifically trained) people from the industrialised nations that deliver the funding for such projects needs to be examined first. What is so special about biodiversity?² In most cases the answer is likely to relate to two main arguments:

- The very long time frame (that is, 'geological' or 'evolutionary' time) over which the impressive array of animals and plants present in the area earmarked for protection, came into being; and
- The interdependence of species ('ecosystem processes'), and the dependence of humans on the 'ecological services' of complex or biodiverse ecosystems (Costanza et al. 1997).

Of these two arguments for the importance of biodiversity, the latter is the one that is generally accepted by both the local staff of WWF and (some) landowners. Ecological linkages are part of indigenous knowledge systems and are easy to exemplify. I will return to this argument below. But it is the first argument that I think is of more interest in this context. The theory of evolution, and all its associated assumptions, is clearly a fundamental underpinning to the logic that is used by many conservationists. I suggest that much of Western environmentalism is motivated by the desire to conserve biodiversity for 'posterity'. That is, value is attributed to biodiversity simply because of the alarming contrast between the time it took for the species presently inhabiting the planet to evolve (around four billion years), and the rate at which those species are now being extinguished by human influences — in relative terms, the blink of an eye. This 'posterity' value is underlined by the inherent value attributed by conservationists and conservation organisations, including (and perhaps most notably) WWF, to 'species' and particularly to *endemic* species, which are regarded as all the more special and important because of their limited range and consequently their increased vulnerability to extinction. The relative importance of endemic species to the health and intactness of the ecological networks they are

part of is less important (to conservationists) than their value as a unique and irreplaceable product of the evolutionary process.

Before moving on to the second argument (ecological connectedness) for the value of biodiversity, it is important to ask: is this posterity value of species something that is shared by rural Melanesian landowners? In most cases the short answer is, 'no'. To the vast majority of rural Melanesians the idea of biological species as something with *inherent* value is an alien concept that is underpinned by an alien and unacceptable set of assumptions. Most landowners embrace some form of Christianity, and profess to believe in the creation stories of the Christian Bible (perhaps in addition to a range of pre-Christian creation myths in most places). In fact some aspects of Judeo-Christian creation myths appear to sit very neatly with Melanesian ideas, expressed in their own myths, of the correct (teleological) relationship between humans and the natural world. The God (Genesis 1: verses 26–30) who gave them 'dominion' over 'the fish of the sea ... the fowl of the air ... and over all of the earth' and required that they 'subdue' the earth and use all its animal and vegetable resources for food, presents Himself as having an appropriately instrumental view of natural resources being there *for* human exploitation and consumption.³

The theory of evolution is either not understood, or is poorly understood, and as such holds very little credibility amongst most rural people in the Western Solomons, and indeed among many urban people as well (including most of the local, non-technical staff on the WWF project). The level of scientific education in Melanesia generally is very low, and a good grasp of biology, in particular the theory of evolution, is mostly lacking. At the high school in Gizo they teach evolution in science classes, but also teach a literal interpretation of the book of Genesis. When I asked one teacher whether or not she saw these two sets of ideas as conflicting she said she had not thought about it, and was clearly quite unconcerned about the contradictions inherent in this part of the syllabus. In any case, the concept of species as something to be treasured and protected *for their own sake* is simply not embraced. This view of the natural world is also reflected in folk taxonomies, most of which are highly utilitarian, and tend to lump relatively useless species into single taxa (Berlin, Breedlove and Raven 1973; Clark 1981; Foale 1998a). Insects, for example, are never subdivided into anywhere near the number of lower order taxa, such as species, that have been described by Western scientists (Bulmer and Healey 1993). Although more than 300 species of scleractinean corals occur on Melanesian reefs (Veron 1995:160), they are in most places referred to by one local taxon, and in pijin are generally referred to as 'stone'. Heavily utilised species on the other hand, such as yams (*Dioscorea esculanta* and *D. alata*), or regularly harvested species of fish or

shellfish may be split into multiple categories based on varietal differences, sexual dimorphism, or size (Foale 1998a).

The second argument for the importance of conserving biodiversity is its importance to the adequate functioning of ecosystems, that is, that loss of species compromises ecosystem function which ultimately impacts negatively on human survival. It is of course true that maintenance of biodiversity is important for the protection of tropical rainforest and mangrove ecosystems as well as coral reefs, and that the intactness of these systems in turn ensures the long-term potential productivity of the land (but see Clarke and Thaman 1997 for an interesting critique of this argument), and coastal fisheries respectively. Selective logging can cause irreversible ecological changes through the removal of areas of canopy, the introduction of weeds, and the severe degradation and loss of soils from desiccation, compaction and erosion. Similarly, intensive and widespread dynamite fishing on coral reefs can generate rubble zones that prevent the re-establishment of corals and thus the recovery of the system. However, the basic processes of these species-rich ecosystems are much more resilient to certain types of damage (Connell 1978), or the removal of redundant or non-keystone species (Paine 1966; Naeem 1998), than many conservationists appear to be willing to acknowledge. When looked at in terms of ecological processes, would the extinction of the (presently endangered) leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) in fact make a measurable difference to the vital ecosystem processes of Indo-Pacific coral reefs, or even pelagic (open ocean) food webs? While it might seem rash to make a dogmatic assertion to the negative, given the scarcity of empirical ecological data available, I believe that any appeals to rural Melanesians not to kill leatherback turtles on the grounds of the importance of these species to marine ecosystem functions, and ultimately to the long-term food security of local human populations, would entail a certain level of disingenuousness (see also Vanclay 1998). Since marine turtles of all species are now referred to as 'Flagship Species' by WWF and are the focus of major fundraising campaigns, the organisation still faces a significant challenge to convince Solomon Islanders of the value of these species. When a Vonavona Lagoon fisherman was asked what he would tell his grandchildren if he discovered that he was responsible for killing the last hawksbill turtle on earth, he answered 'I'll tell them how good it tasted' (Richard Hamilton, pers. comm. 2001).

A significant number of the landowners who interacted with the WWF project did, however, appear to embrace the goal of achieving sustainability of yields of key subsistence or cash-generating resources, such as timber, marine invertebrates or fish, usually declaring this to be in the interests of leaving

something for future generations.⁴ These long-term *economic* goals facilitated something of a 'marriage of convenience' between these aspirations and the goals of the project, since activities that conserve such key resources also (usually) conserve biodiversity by default. At the same time, the project also tried to encourage the recognition of the value of forest plant biodiversity by conducting workshop exercises in which the participants list the traditional and contemporary uses of plants in their community. These exercises generated some very impressive lists of local plant taxa and their uses, and some of these were produced in a format that is useable in schools. The idea was that by encouraging people to think about these plant uses, the forests in which the plants occur would increase in value in landowners' minds, and thus run a lower risk of being liquidated at the hands of industrial logging contractors. Of course this reasoning assumes that this increased value, of non-timber forest resources (as a result of the project's work), is equal to or greater than the value accorded to the (mostly imported) consumer commodities and services (including medicines) that can be bought via the liquidation option. This appears to be an assumption that has not been met in many instances (Macintyre and Foale in press; Filer with Sekhran 1998:322).

The choices rural Solomon Islanders make about traditional (that is, forest-based) versus modern (imported) medicines are generally transparently pragmatic. Introduced medical practices effect cures and save lives that would be lost if only traditional systems were used. Many bush medicines are used all over Melanesia, and were turned to on Bougainville after the PNG government embargoed all services to the island. But Western observers and Bougainvillians alike acknowledge that the lack of modern medicines and medical services on Bougainville has caused great suffering there. Solomon Islands women have embraced Western medical interventions in childbirth and most expectant mothers go to a clinic or hospital for delivery.⁵ On the other hand, a number of traditional herbal cures for malaria are still commonly used in most parts of Western Solomons. Paradoxically, the most popular of these is an exotic plant from Malaysia. Sago is one of the most important local plants, used mainly for roofing on the picturesque leaf houses so popularly depicted in tourist brochures, but when people are asked what they are saving their money for, one of the most frequent responses, after school fees, is roofing iron. Sago-leaf roofs are time-consuming and labourious to construct, are rapidly deteriorated by weathering as well as insects and vermin, require routine repairs after only a couple of years, and usually last a maximum of ten years. Roofing iron is vastly easier and quicker to install and lasts a great deal longer. Only in its final stages did the project start to look carefully at this kind of information and the development aspirations of its

constituents — something that undoubtedly should have been done right at the beginning of the project.

The arguments for the importance of conserving biodiversity run into trouble on other fronts. As indicated above, Solomon Islanders, like most Melanesians, are acutely aware of the level of affluence enjoyed by the citizens of industrialised nations (Lawrence 1964). And it is precisely these industrialised nations that have already extinguished very large fractions of their original biodiversity, as a result of forestry, agricultural and livestock developments — industries that have contributed substantially to the economic development, and high level of affluence of those nations. It is in this economic context that carbon-trading schemes present a persuasive option (Filer with Sekhran 1998:xv). At the time of writing, some discussion about a carbon trading agreement was proceeding between a local council of chiefs and Japanese consortium. The outcome, and whatever local benefit it may bring, is yet to be seen. Given the overwhelming pressures to secure such basic needs as education, roofing iron and medical services, the prospect of a logging operation or large oil palm project can appear much more attractive than small-scale developments that do not generate sufficient income to buy things that people perceive as greatly improving their living standards.

THE SILVANIA OIL PALM PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT

In 1996 the Kumpulan Emas Berhad (KEB) subsidiary, Sylvania Plantation Products (SI) Ltd, obtained approval from the Mamalone government⁶ to commence preparations for an oil palm conversion project on a 10,000 hectare block of government-owned, or ‘alienated’ land (‘Lot 16’) on Vangunu Island, Marovo Lagoon. The development required clear-felling of more than 6000 hectares of forest, and the relatively steep grades on much of the land meant that terracing would be required. Predictably the prevention of significant runoff of both topsoil and fertiliser into Marovo Lagoon (nominated, but not yet listed, for World Heritage status) remains one of many points of controversy surrounding this development. The project commenced lobbying against the development quite soon after it was proposed. However it is the manner in which WWF initially attempted to lobby both the government and the neighbouring landowners that is of interest here. It should be noted that the oil palm project has been widely and strongly criticised on economic and social⁷ as well as environmental grounds. I also remain convinced that it represents an appalling decision by the government and will result in few if any beneficial changes to the lives of Marovo landowners, and very poor returns for the Solomon Islands government.

In 1997 the WWF project commissioned a planning study for an 'alternative development proposal' to the Sylvania oil palm project. This basically entailed an Australian biologist touring a number of Marovo villages and asking people what kinds of 'developments' they would like to see on Lot 16. A sort of bizarre 'combined wish-list' of project-dependency and environmentalist utopian fantasies was then compiled in a booklet, along with some lovely artwork by the biologist or someone he knew. The 'developments' included a sports stadium, a school, an ecolodge and an ecotourism training centre. None of these 'developments' would actually earn any money, except perhaps for the ecolodge whose earning potential was dubious from the outset, given the fact that Lot 16 had already been selectively logged by Sylvania Products Ltd (an allegedly *separate* subsidiary of Kumpulan Emas). Indeed they would have required a great deal of donor funding⁸ to set up and maintain. This 'alternative development proposal' was then submitted to the government, more than once, with the assumption that the government would consider it as a serious alternative to the oil palm development. Moreover, it was submitted as something that had been produced by the Marovo Butubutu Development Foundation (MBDF), the ineffective 'executive arm' of the (equally ineffective) Marovo Council of Chiefs. The MBDF has been widely acknowledged for some time to be a 'WWF puppet' and lacked any credibility with either the government or Marovo landowners.

Not surprisingly, the government ignored the MBDF alternative development proposal and signed an agreement with Sylvania Plantation Products in July 1999. This gave the company a seventy-five-year lease over Lot 16, and an astonishing array of tax holidays and other financial 'incentives'. The agreement was also signed before any environmental, social or economic impact assessments had been done.

In May 1999, I attended a meeting with Sylvania and KEB executives, the Prime Minister and other senior central government ministers, and a number of Vangunu landowners, at least a dozen of whom opposed the development. At this meeting several of the landowners made claims to Lot 16, in the hope that it would be returned to them under the Ulufa'alu government's policy of returning alienated land to original landowners. It was clear that Vangunu landowners were deeply divided on the issue, and several of those in favour of the development were alleged (and appeared) to be enjoying a close and lucrative relationship with the executives of Sylvania Plantation Products (one of these landowners was in fact so drunk at the time that he was nearly thrown out of the meeting by the security staff). I saw a map of Lot 16 on which rough boundary lines had been drawn dividing it up into four discrete parcels, each belonging to a particular clan. I was also reliably informed that a number of landowners had successfully taken

Silvania Products Ltd (the 'other' subsidiary that did the selective logging on Lot 16) to court and extracted considerable sums of money from them as compensation for damage to *tambu* sites (on Lot 16) by logging operators.⁹ Nothing came of any of the claims for reinstatement of customary ownership over Lot 16. A petition against the development was also signed by more than 1000 landowners around June 1999 and presented to the government.¹⁰ Interestingly, the landowner survey conducted by the government consultant hired by Silvania (in late 1999) to do the social impact statement for the oil palm development listed only five out of twenty-seven Vangunu landowners interviewed as being 'against' the development. Four out of these five came from villages with which the project has regular contact.

In any event, the level of understanding by Vangunu landowners of the long-term implications of the oil palm development is unlikely to be high, and would in most cases probably swing in the direction of whichever party was lobbying (or interviewing) them at the time. The issues are highly complex, laden with technicalities, and are difficult to communicate, especially in a cross-cultural context. Moreover, in this particular case concerns about environmental, economic and social impacts are competing with confused aspirations for 'development'. These in turn are conflated with ambitions for reclamation of customary tenure on land that was 'alienated' in the early 1960s. Nevertheless the issue was clumsily handled by WWF, and could have been dealt with more effectively if more intelligent, socially informed consultations (see Ellis 1997:6-7; Greenpeace Pacific 2000) had been made with Vangunu landowners from the outset.

GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN SOLOMON ISLANDS

One of the most important lessons learned from the failure of both WWF and the dissenting Marovo landowners to deal adequately with the Silvania development was the recognition of the importance of effective and united local government. The vacuum left behind by the dismantling of the Area Council system¹¹ in 1998 highlighted the need for a system of local indigenous government in most parts of Solomon Islands. In Choiseul the Lauru Land Conference (LLC) has been a powerful force since 1981, despite the presence of the Area Councils. In Vella Lavella, the South Vella Chiefs Forum has recently formed (in late 1999), and appears to have solid support and strong leadership. In North New Georgia the Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) in fact doubles as a unique and remarkable system of local government. On the other hand the Marovo Council of Chiefs appears to be largely ineffectual, perhaps partly as a result of high levels of

dependency on aid projects and logging royalties. But the absence of a charismatic leader with the ability to unite and motivate both the chiefs and the people of Marovo also stands out. In Western and Choiseul Provinces the key ingredient to effective local government appears to be strong and charismatic leadership. Where conservationists are able to work together with such leaders there might possibly be an increased chance of success.

The recent collaboration between the University of Queensland and the CFC in North New Georgia on a large reforestation project is an interesting example of a 'joint venture' that may succeed, though it is still in very early stages. The way that the CFC appears to have completely eclipsed the clan basis of land-ownership in North New Georgia certainly makes this group appear to be easier to work with on a large project. I will touch on the CFC again below, with regard to a women's project.

However given the inherently factious and fragmented nature of Melanesian society, and the under-supply of charismatic leadership effective over large areas, it is probably prudent for the environmental movement to look for alternative strategies. One technique, that may experience limited success in the management of resources in Western Province, is the regulation of resource use under the provincial government's Resource Management Order (RMO). This is simply a legislative tool that enables a particular set of resource management rules to be drafted and gazetted, and thereby enforceable by law under the Western Province Resource Management Ordinance. One currently exists for harvesting of megapode eggs on Simbo Island. Ultimately the usefulness of an RMO depends of course on the capacity of both the provincial government and the landowning group to enforce the rules once they are gazetted. In most cases this capacity is not likely to be great, but the project is currently working hard at mobilising enforcement capacity for the Simbo Megapode Management Ordinance (something akin to a Resource Management Order). This particular set of rules pertained to restrictions on the harvesting of megapode eggs on Simbo Island, an important subsistence and artisanal resource for the Simbo people, which was perilously close to collapse when the project commenced.

Another approach that the project has used (and will probably continue to use) with some success, is to provide 'services' of various kinds. The most successful of such services thus far has been legal awareness regarding various acts, including the mining, forestry, and fisheries acts. This awareness work gets away somewhat from the kind of biodiversity-focused material that is normally produced as part of the 'Awareness and Information' component, but has been more appreciated by landowners. Other services may include various kinds of resource monitoring, for example forest inventories, for those landowners who

have aspirations for forestry projects that are deemed to be sustainable. In the final two years significant time and resources were committed to training reef owners in stock assessment techniques for fish and commercial marine invertebrate species (such as trochus and various bivalves).

HOW TO DEAL WITH PROJECT DEPENDENCY?

The project faced a dilemma in attempting to assist communities or community groups to get started on ventures. There is a long and sorry record of aid-sponsored venture failure in the Solomon Islands, with the large and expensive European Union-funded projects being the most conspicuous examples (see also Carrier 1981 and Rodman 1987). However, community groups continue to face the difficulty of raising their own capital for business or other development ventures, since land, their primary asset, cannot be used as collateral for loans if it is owned under customary tenure, which includes more than 85 per cent of land in the Solomons. Capital funding or equipment handouts are often cynically squandered, embezzled, destroyed by disgruntled 'community members', or simply wasted or abused through management incompetence. Such problems are at least partly underpinned by lack of 'ownership' of the project, or disputes over land rights or control over the venture, that pit members of so-called 'communities' against each other, resulting in failure of the project. Political rifts within communities are a very common cause of donor-driven venture failure throughout Melanesia (Schoeffel 1997) and at the time of writing are still receiving inadequate attention from most senior WWF managers and donors. But community rifts are not the only cause of project failure. In the case of WWF's project in Western Solomons, cynicism about the usefulness of biodiversity conservation for improving the lives of partner community members explains (at least in part) the lack of commitment to the project's goals, by both community and project staff members. Another source of this cynicism is the knowledge that, in all probability, another well-intentioned, and lavishly funded, aid project will eventually come along that will provide yet another source of goods or equipment provided one plays along with their agenda convincingly enough. Such cynicism not infrequently manifests as (sometimes very creative) attempts to scam or embezzle money and 'cargo' from the project. For some, 'resource management' obviously means managing to conserve (for oneself) the resources provided by the project.

Given the greater likelihood of men than women to mismanage funds given for aid-sponsored development ventures, the project made several attempts to assist local women's groups with ecologically sustainable business enterprises. One of these initially appeared to be destined for success and is worth some

discussion here. In mid-1999, the project sponsored ten sewing machines for the women of Baraulu village in Roviana Lagoon as an 'incentive' to commence a management regime for marine resources in their local mangrove forests. The rationale was that the sewing machines would allow them to produce and sell garments, the income from which would free them to some extent from their hitherto heavy dependence on the shell-beds for food and cash, which was forcing them to over-harvest the fishery. The request was conveyed via an anthropologist¹² who was working in the area at the time. The women formed themselves into a project group and signed a contract with the project, undertaking to impose an eight-month harvesting prohibition (September to May — the high-tide season) on a small number of bivalve species (predominantly *Anadara* sp. and *Polymesoda* sp.) that they perceived to be declining in the area due to over-harvesting. At the end of the closed season they harvested the shell beds and declared that the closure had resulted in an enormous increase in the size of the harvest, and that they would be doing the same thing for the next high-tide season.

After a number of visits to the village, and the shell-beds, by various WWF staff including myself, it turned out that, while the shellfish management regime was working reasonably well, the women's group was in fact deeply divided and factionalised, and certain members of it were attempting to cynically manipulate funds and equipment from WWF in much the same way as I have outlined for more male-dominated scenarios above. We also learned that prior to the donation of the sewing machines by WWF, several of the women in the group already owned their own sewing machines, but refused to allow them to be used for the group project. Baraulu is in fact a community that has been engaged with multinational logging enterprises for some time (community members have rights to significant areas of forested land on the mainland of New Georgia Island), and many members of the community had been recipients of large amounts of money in the form of logging royalties.

I should also note that in terms of fisheries management, a system of serial prohibitions, which is essentially what the traditional *tambu* system represents, is not the most effective means of managing a shell-fish fishery, despite the apparent 'success' of the *tambu* system installed by the Baraulu women, as evidenced by the larger than normal harvests they and some WWF officers reported. At the end of the *tambu*, the number of shells *ought* to be higher than it was at the start, due to growth of formerly unharvestable juveniles in the area subject to the closure. Whether this once-off harvest would have in fact been significantly larger than all the collective harvests made if there had been no *tambu* on the shell-beds, is a moot point. What WWF was asked to 'subsidise' is a traditional management

system that coastal Melanesians have practised since pre-colonial times, though the reasons have tended to be more concerned with enforcing territorial claims or allowing the stock to build up for a scheduled feast, than actually improving yields (Polunin 1984, Foale 1998b). This is essentially the reason the women were comfortable with a simple *tambu* regime as the 'management' system of choice. In hindsight, the fact that the Baraulu women were able to get WWF to pay them to install a *tambu* system that is in fact a normal part of their traditional pattern of usage of the resources calls into question the wisdom of WWF's involvement with this scheme (a decision, I should add, which I fully supported at the time). The discovery that some women were considerably less financially disadvantaged than they originally led WWF management to believe, also demonstrates the need for some socioeconomic monitoring prior to and after any such externally driven development assistance in the future.

In terms of shellfish management, the dramatic improvements to fishery yields that could be made by using a network of judiciously located *permanent* no-take reserves are abundantly documented for many fisheries (Alcala and Russ 1990; Roberts and Hawkins 2000), and should form the basis for any serious attempts at improving any small-scale fishery management in Melanesia. In my experience, however, such a strategy is much less in tune with local customs (most reef owners insist on being able to harvest reefs at least once a year to provide food or money for Christmas festivities or other large expenditures) and as such may take some time to be adopted by reef owners in the Solomon Islands, despite the superior economic (and ecological) benefits in the medium to long term.

Despite this unexpected turn of events at Baraulu, WWF had greater success with another, smaller women's group at Tique on southern Vangunu Island, also with a sewing project. At the time of writing that sewing project was proceeding well and making a modest income for the women's group running it. There were important differences between the Tique and Baraulu groups, including the fact that the Tique women donated all profits to the local (Uniting) church, and that the Tique community had been strongly resisting all attempts at setting up commercial logging on their land for many years. Without having any actual data on the subject, I think it is also worth speculating on the likelihood of a significantly higher level of endorsement of possessive individualism by the CFC (the dominant church at Baraulu) than the Uniting Church. Although the CFC is essentially an indigenous church, it still carries with it much from the Methodist tradition (it broke away from the Methodist Church in 1960) and has also been influenced by the New Christian Right (Ernst 1994:74, 75 and 271), both of which espouse the individualistic accumulation of wealth as a virtue in itself.

Debra McDougall (2000) presents an engaging and illuminating analysis and discussion on the subject of church-based women's groups, particularly the Uniting Church Women's Fellowship, in the Solomon Islands, and the reasons that some have turned out to be more cohesive social units than traditional 'communities'.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic formula of the project was founded upon fuzzy romantic notions of 'communities' as happy cohesive social units that are capable of and willing to work together to manage their resources, and on the idea that conservation values could be instilled in landowners simply via the transmission of the right kind of information. The ability of landowners to clearly identify their rights to, and the boundaries of, the land and reefs they use, and agree about these with their neighbours, is also an important, but usually unmet, prerequisite for the success of the recipe. The basic (scientific) assumptions underpinning the high value attributed to biodiversity by Western environmentalists are typically not shared by most rural Melanesians and this has led to cynical attempts to manipulate the project by both landowners and project staff. This cynicism is also fuelled by the stark disparities in personal wealth between expatriate environmentalists and local landowners (and local staff), and the knowledge that not only have huge fractions of the primary resources and their associated biodiversity been savagely extinguished in these expatriates' home countries, but this process has clearly been of enormous economic benefit to their populations.

The project would have benefited greatly from careful analysis of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and tenure issues in its early stages, as was pointed out in the mid-term review. However, no amount of analysis will facilitate adequate resource management, and especially a lucrative development, in situations where tenure disputes are unresolved. The fact that some land cases are still being contested after 25-30 years suggests that in many cases disputes are patently irresolvable. Community-scale development ventures are likely to work only where there is a genuine recognition of resource limitations, and (assuming it can be found) sufficient community cohesion for a management plan and/or development venture to be supported by everyone in the community. In most cases ventures are more likely to succeed at the scale of the family, not the community, but this is certainly not a guarantee of success. At the time of writing, the WWF project has run its five-year course, has received funding for another five years, and has been renamed as the WWF Solomon Islands Country Program. After a final review and a lengthy process of stakeholder consultation and planning, it has now chosen to stay away from providing any direct support to

development ventures in the future. It will instead be placing much greater emphasis on providing a range of clearly defined 'technical' services aimed at assisting landowners with basic sustainable resource management strategies.

NOTES

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¹ The choice of ecotourism as a development is now proving to be generally problematic in PNG, Fiji and Solomon Islands, due to law and order problems.

² There are of course other important reasons that Western conservationists are concerned about environmentally destructive resource development patterns, and these include impacts on atmosphere and climate, land degradation, coastal pollution, and loss of undiscovered medicines. However I will go out on a limb here and suggest that loss of biodiversity is the main one.

³ However some Christian leaders also preach the need for stewardship of God's creations (Debra McDougall, pers. comm. 2001).

⁴ However there is still a striking lack of recognition of resource limitations throughout Melanesia, for important historical reasons (see Bulmer 1982; and Van Helden 1998: 242-4).

⁵ The maternal (549/100,000) and infant (44/1000) mortality rates are significantly lower in Solomon Islands than in neighbouring PNG (930/100,000, and 77/1000, respectively), where acceptance of obstetric intervention is apparently lower (World Health Organisation web site data, June, 2000).

⁶ The government of Prime Minister Solomon Mamalone replaced Francis Billy Hilly as Prime Minister in a 'parliamentary coup' in November 1994 and ruled until August 1997, when Bartholemew Ulufa'alu was elected Prime Minister, and leader of the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC).

⁷ In April 2000, the project received robust and authoritative independent critiques of Sylvania's social impact statement (January 2000), and the

company's agreement with the government (signed in July 1999), by Martha Macintyre and Ian Robinson respectively.

⁸ I was asked to draft a Global Environment Facility (GEF) concept paper in June 1999, when lobbying against Sylvania acquiring a seventy-five-year lease over Lot 16 was at its hottest, but never found out what happened to this after I sent it to the WWF South Pacific Program Office.

⁹ This indicates the existence of what are obviously persistent, and legally recognised, customary rights over land that is at present formally owned by the government, via a cash purchase that was made by the colonial government in the early 1960s.

¹⁰ Seri Hite, WWF Solomons Country Coordinator, personal communication.

¹¹ This is not to say that the Area Council system was an effective form of local government, it mostly wasn't.

¹² Dr Shankar Aswani, then of the University of Auckland, now with the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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