

Biodiversity in the South Pacific:

A Matter of Survival

Background: The South Pacific

The South Pacific region has 22 small island countries and territories. These have 5.2 million people living on 550,000 km² of land, spread over 29 million km² of the world's biggest ocean. Exclude Papua New Guinea, and the figures drop dramatically to 90 000 km² of land and 2.2 million people.

In contrast to their small land areas, these countries have enormous sea areas in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). With only a few people as custodians of this enormous part of the Earth's surface, the region faces

great difficulties in protecting its fragile environment from internal and external influences.

This problem is exacerbated by poor public and political awareness of the principles of sustainable economic development. Although commitments to environmentally sound development are widely expressed, these are not always mirrored by the funding, staffing and institutional frameworks needed for planning and administering this development.



A pristine reef habitat:
but for how much
longer?



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Biodiversity in the South Pacific

The tropical islands of the vast South Pacific region are renowned for their diversity, and have the world's highest proportion of endemic species per unit area, due to the isolated evolution of island species. The region also has vast, complex marine ecosystems and the most extensive coral reef systems on Earth. These are essential for the productivity and quality of the region, and in maintaining the lifestyles of the Pacific's peoples.

Despite the importance of preserving this globally significant biodiversity, only 0.15% of total land area and under 20% of known ecosystems are in designated protected areas, of which few are managed well. With rapidly growing populations and related pressures, this diversity, and the associated species, is among the most threatened in the world.

It is estimated that over 75% of extinct birds and mammals in recent history were island dwellers, and more extinctions are expected soon. Over 10% of the world's bird species are on individual islands. At the same time, island flora are far more endangered on islands than on

Island biological diversity and individual species are "on the critical list".

continents. These facts present a case for high priority to conserve biodiversity in the South Pacific. Urgent actions are needed now on many fronts to ensure the survival of species and habitats in the region.

The South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP)

For most Pacific island societies, biodiversity is not just for scientists, economists, or tourists. It is a capital inheritance, maintained or even enhanced by past generations, and passed on to the present and future generations of islanders. Biodiversity is not money to be spent or replaced: it is a capital resource needed for maintaining and developing Pacific societies. It is the basis for traditional subsistence affluence, and almost all cash and non-cash income. It is the basis for the ecological, cultural and economic survival of the Pacific islands in the modern world.

So, biodiversity conservation in the South Pacific is not driven by just a desire to protect uniqueness or endemism, or for scientific importance or research, or for other technical discoveries that can be used commercially. It is for survival.



Agriculture does not have to compete with the forest.

This explains why we in the Pacific need this programme. It is a five-year endeavour to identify, establish, and initially manage a series of large, diverse "conservation areas", containing as many ecologically important features of biodiversity conservation as possible. Human activities will be guided in the areas to protect these features, and to allow long-term sustainable use of the area's natural resources.

The Aim

SPBCP aims to preserve the biological diversity of the South Pacific for the benefit of the peoples of the region and the world, for now and the future. Its guiding objective is to ensure continued viability of the full range of ecosystem types and species, especially those of global concern, which are the biological diversity and natural heritage of the South Pacific.

Key Activities

1. identify, establish and initially manage in-country conservation areas critical to the survival of threatened or endangered species, which are regionally representative, and which are particularly rich in biodiversity;
2. implement existing and planned species conservation programmes in the region, such as forest seed banks, and the marine turtle, marine mammal and bird programmes, in conjunction with national governments and private conservation groups; and,
3. develop education and training programmes to improve awareness of the importance of conserving biodiversity.

The Participants

Fourteen (14) of the twenty-two member states and administrations of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) will participate in the SPBCP. Other SPREP member countries can participate in SPBCP activities, but they will not be eligible for financial support from the SPBCP.

The Current Status

A preliminary project concept for SPBCP was prepared by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), and endorsed by many South Pacific countries in 1990, giving impetus to the work that followed. A SPREP / United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project design team is now consulting with regional governments, non-government organisations, community groups, international agencies and others to prioritise the needs of the participating countries. These consultations ensure that the SPBCP responds directly to the special needs of the region, and it will encourage more regional co-operation in conserving biodiversity.

Countries participating in the SPBCP:

- Cook Islands
- Federated States of Micronesia
- Fiji
- Kiribati
- Marshall Islands
- Nauru
- Niue
- Palau
- Solomon Islands
- Tokelau
- Tonga
- Tuvalu
- Vanuatu
- Western Samoa



We cannot lose it all in the name of development

The SPBCP and UNCED

UNCED is an opportunity for the world to address relevant links between biodiversity and other environmental and development issues, by elaborating on the Action Plan in Agenda 21.

The island countries of the South Pacific, as elsewhere in the world, rely on their biological resources for their subsistence, and their economic, social and cultural well-being. Endemic species can be lost in a few months, by destroying a critical habitat in the name of development. This is often supported by "outside" sources, driven by profit, and cannot be sustained for long. The incredible

diversity and endemism in the region also make the South Pacific a region of global importance for conservation.

This huge region, with a few people responsible for protecting it, lacks the resources to implement effective and sustainable conservation programmes. Without the support of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the South Pacific and the world will be responsible for the alarming loss of biological diversity that continues now. UNCED and the developed countries clearly have a special responsibility to support this region.

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Area Served by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)

