

NATIONAL REPORT TO THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

REPUBLIC OF PALAU
APRIL 2000

1. THE STRATEGIES AND PRIORITIES ESTABLISHED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND/OR POLICIES

While the Republic of Palau, with over 2,000 mm of rainfall annually, is not subject to desertification, we have felt the effects of global climate change, and of land degradation due to human activities. Two effects of climate change are of particular concern to Palau: drought due to the El Nino/ENSO phenomenon; and sea level rise. The Republic of Palau is additionally threatened with land degradation due to road building, agricultural expansion, and various other land-clearing and forest cutting activities. Economic development needs to be undertaken in a manner, which will not reduce the ability of future generations of Palauans to benefit from Palau's rich natural resources.

The Republic of Palau is located near the global center of marine biodiversity. Within this small archipelago there are over 1,300 species of fishes, and over 700 species of corals. All of these marine organisms, and the ecosystems on which they depend, are threatened by small increases in ocean temperatures, which are lethal to many species of corals. In addition, marine ecosystems can be damaged or destroyed by terrestrial activities, which increase soil erosion and/or which add toxic chemicals and other pollutants to the marine ecosystems. Palau also has approximately 200 species of endemic plants; plants found nowhere else on earth. Development activities and climate change may threaten many of these species as well.

The Republic of Palau has just begun to come to grips with the environmental issues raised by the CCD. Environmental degradation is a serious threat to this small island nation. Following are a few examples of potential causes of land degradation.

HUMAN ACTIVITIES

While climate change, drought, and sea level rise present significant long term threats to Palau, human activities pose perhaps the greatest immediate and short term threat to Palau's natural resources. These human activities include fishing/overfishing, dredging, and numerous terrestrial activities, which can result in damage not only to terrestrial resources, but in pollution and destruction of marine resources as well.

COMPACT ROAD

Construction has just begun on an asphalt road, known as the "Compact Road," planned to encircle Palau's largest island, Babeldaob. While 52 miles of road may not sound like much to most countries in the UN, to Palau, this is a major project which can impact most of the archipelago. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will oversee the construction of the road. Erosion mitigation measures will be taken according to standards developed by a group of local scientists. However, there is widespread concern that erosion mitigation standards may not be closely adhered to, that rare endemic plant and animal species may be destroyed during or following road construction, and that opening previously inaccessible locations to road traffic may result in their degradation.

DROUGHT

Drought is an intermittent issue in Palau, a country with over 2,000 millimeters of rain per year. We learned in 1997-98, however, that we too could be affected by drought. As a result of the El Nino/Southern Oscillation phenomenon, Palau endured several months with little or no rain. Crops were affected, as was delivery of piped water when reservoirs and streams were depleted. Similar drought conditions were suffered intermittently during 1982-1984, and are likely to occur again, although the timing cannot be predicted.

SEA LEVEL RISE

Another environmental issue of major importance to Palau is the rise in sea level. In the past two years, salt water intrusion into taro paddies has taken place during unusually high tides. We are concerned that this is a trend, and that much of our low-lying land will be rendered unproductive. Since taro (*Colocasia esculenta* and *Cyrtosperma chamissonis*) production is largely the province of women, this phenomenon will profoundly and adversely affect women's lives and livelihoods, as well as the nutrition and economy of the entire nation.

KED/SAVANNA

Approximately one fourth of Palau's land area, mainly on the island of Babeldaob, is in moderately to steeply sloping grassland, known locally as "ked," and often referred to as savanna lands. These grassland areas are generally sparsely vegetated and highly subject to soil erosion. The soils are low in nutrient content and are generally moderately to highly acidic.

The *ked* areas are also subject to frequent fires during dry periods. The fires further deplete organic matter, and result in greater soil erosion during rains following burning. This cycle of burning and erosion has already resulted in areas completely without vegetation. It is not known whether these areas are expanding, and monitoring is needed. The cycle of burning and erosion not only degrades the land on which it occurs; it also has deleterious effects on low-lying areas, mangrove forests, the lagoon, and eventually the coral reef. Efforts to prevent the burning have met with very limited success. These efforts need to be expanded. All of these grassland areas would benefit from afforestation. However, attempts at afforestation have also met with limited success, mainly due to destruction of tree seedlings by fire.

Most of the rest of Babeldaob is forested, and thus protected from erosion, but deforestation would pose serious threats of land degradation.

INVASIVE SPECIES

As an isolated island nation, Palau is threatened with invasion by alien plant and animal species. These invasive plants and animals can disrupt the island ecosystems, crowding out and/or destroying native and endemic species. Palau has recently strengthened its quarantine laws and is upgrading its quarantine staff, but much work remains to be done to prevent further introductions. Work is also needed to control or eradicate invasive species, which have already been introduced.

The Republic of Palau has yet to develop a plan or strategy to directly address desertification and land degradation. However, a number of agencies are currently working in Palau to protect terrestrial and marine resources. In addition, the Palau National Master Development Plan addresses the need to develop Palau's natural resources sustainably.

The UNCCD will provide Palau with a framework for specifically addressing issues related to global climate change, desertification, and land degradation. Palau intends to develop a National Coordinating Body to coordinate and lead these efforts, beginning this year. There is no organized plan or organization at present to deal with these problems. There are, however several organizations and government agencies which deal with environmental issues. What needs to be done at present is to create an organization/consortium of these organizations and agencies to coordinate efforts among them.

2. THE INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES TAKEN TO IMPLEMENT THE CCD

As noted above, no specific measures have been taken to date; Palau has just signed on to the UNCCD, and there has not yet been time to create a National Coordinating Body to lead this effort. The National Master Development Plan (NMDP) will provide a framework within which the NCB can work. Additionally, the President's National Task Force on Agricultural Development has just submitted its final report and recommendations (April 2000). The government of Japan also has experts in Palau at the present time, contributing to updating the NMDP.

3. PARTICIPATORY PROCESS IN SUPPORT OF THE PREPARATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NAP

The national government is still considering how best to create the NCB, and the makeup of its membership. Among the stakeholders in this process are such government agencies as the Environmental Quality Protection Board, the Ministry of National Resources, the Bureau of Women's Affairs, and others. Non-governmental organizations include the Palau Conservation Society, Palau Community College, the Palau Community Action Agency, the Coral Reef Research Foundation, and

several others. Several women's organizations have a stake in climate change, since the women's taro farms are most threatened by rising sea levels.

An inventory of stakeholders must be done; following which will be a series of organizational meetings. The NCB will then be capable of developing the National Action Plan.

4. CONSULTATIVE PROCESS IN SUPPORT OF THE PREPARATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NAP AND THE PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT WITH THE DEVELOPED COUNTRY PARTNERS AND OTHER ENTITIES

The consultative process will be an essential part of the development of a National Action Plan in Palau. We lack expertise in the areas of global climate and climate change, and have limited resources in related areas. Palau will need considerable support and assistance in order to develop an adequate action plan. As Mr. Isaac Soaladaob noted in his statement to the 3d Conference of Parties to the UNCCD, Palau wishes to organize an awareness seminar this year, but will need assistance to do so.

5. MEASURES TAKEN OR PLANNED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE NAP, INCLUDING MEASURES TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT, TO CONSERVE NATURAL RESOURCES, TO IMPROVE INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION, TO IMPROVE KNOWLEDGE OF DESERTIFICATION AND TO MONITOR AND ASSESS THE EFFECTS OF DROUGHT.

Such measures have yet to be undertaken, and await development of the NAP. Palau is fully aware of the need to include all the above measures, and they will be fully taken into account by the NCB when it develops the NAP.

6. FINANCIAL ALLOCATIONS FROM NATIONAL BUDGETS IN SUPPORT OF IMPLEMENTATION AS WELL AS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AND TECHNICAL COOPERATION RECEIVED AND NEEDED, IDENTIFYING AND PRIORITIZING REQUIREMENTS

Developing an adequate response to the problems created by global climate change will take resources, which the Republic of Palau does not have. Without doubt, financial support will be needed. A budget has yet to be developed, however.

7. A REVIEW OF THE BENCHMARKS AND INDICATORS UTILIZED TO MEASURE PROGRESS AND AN ASSESSMENT THEREOF

These have not yet been developed.