

CORRESPONDENCE

Ecocolonialism and indigenous knowledge systems — comment

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IN the South Pacific islands it is unrealistic to approach biodiversity conservation without, at the same time, addressing the social and economic needs of those who have a customary association with the area concerned. Cox and Elmqvist (1993) have recognized this and pursued an innovative course of action for rainforest protection. Their disappointment at the loss of an opportunity for external assistance to Tafua villagers for rainforest conservation is understandable. It is important that the reasons for this missed opportunity be known and understood.

It is unhelpful that the authors present the Samoan situation in a confrontationist "them" and "us" mode, implying that their preferred approach is faultless, while that of other outsiders is wrong.

There will, and must, be many more efforts to harness the expertise and financial resources of outsiders so as to assist Pacific islanders to develop their land and sea resources in a sustainable manner and to help protect biodiversity. Because of the complexity of the social and cultural issues which arise, conservation of biodiversity in these circumstances is never straightforward. It is vitally important that these early efforts to work with Pacific islanders in conservation be carefully documented, and lessons identified and learned for application in future conservation activities.

Those of us working with Pacific islanders as partners, assisting their moves towards sustainable development of natural resources, seek to learn from the experience of the Samoan villagers of Falealupo and Tafua. We understand how difficult it is for them to secure and sustain true "indigenous control". However, my colleagues are likely to be as disappointed as I am at how a good opportunity to learn from the Samoan experience through this paper has been somewhat blunted by the authors' use of it to vent their frustrations, so losing the objectivity needed to present a clear and balanced case study. As practical people, with little interest in a wordy polemic about

"ecocolonialism" peppered with the jargon of "paradigms" and "insular ecological templates" we look for ideas and lessons which might assist us to strengthen our partnerships with customary landholding groups and so improve prospects for conservation of biodiversity.

The authors properly target a key area of difficulty — the considerable differences between the perceptions of outsiders and of Pacific islanders, about conservation and about what are appropriate actions to achieve this. As they show, this difference is reflected in the thinking and the modes of operation of Aid organizations. There is a growing interest among Aid organizations to assist customary landholding groups and they seek to do this through non-government organizations (NGOs), realizing that these are much more effective than government bodies in communicating at "grass roots" level. I wholeheartedly agree with the authors' point that associations of customary landholders themselves constitute a special form of NGO and that they deserve direct assistance. However, I also appreciate the fact that organizations which provide assistance have a responsibility to others to ensure that funds are properly accounted for. Though often strong on decision making, and organization, village based groups sometimes lack the required money management skills, and the planning perspective needed to produce sustainable conservation results.

Where this is so, it is appropriate to build a village level capacity for resource management and/or conservation area planning and for project management as part of a carefully designed programme of assistance. The role of the formal NGOs through which such assistance might be initially managed should be spelled out clearly as being interim and as being geared to provide support and training for the "grass roots" beneficiaries with a view to the latter assuming full control of external inputs at the earliest possible date. The authors unfortunately dismiss the NGO assistance

model for conservation out of hand. Yet elsewhere in the Pacific islands (Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, for instance) it largely works well. Samoan village communities, too, are assisted in many ways through partnerships with NGOs in areas other than biodiversity conservation.

From the authors' account it would seem that the Aid agency which attempted to support Tafua villagers in their rainforest protection initiative has much to learn about effective means of assisting Pacific islander landholding groups. A reasoned and balanced presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts would help them and others to provide more effective assistance to Pacific islanders. Unfortunately, this paper does little to assist in this respect. Though it does make some good points and finishes with a stirring and useful conclusion, some of the audience of interested conservation biologists may not have persevered through the digression on "ecocolonialism".

The Samoan rainforest covenant model in its two forms — through direct control by village councils, and through NGO assistance, deserves a more considered examination. There is much that conservation biologists could and should learn from this experience and so make their efforts in biodiversity conservation in areas subject to customary rights more effective. It is commendable that *Pacific Conservation Biology* is prepared to devote space to this important subject. Now that the Samoan situation has been opened up it would be good to hear the views of others involved.

REFERENCE

- Cox, P. A. and Elmqvist, T., 1993. Ecocolonialism and indigenous knowledge systems: village controlled rainforest preserves in Samoa. *Pacific Cons. Biol.* 1: 6–13.



REBUTTAL

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WE appreciate the thoughtful commentary of Graham Baines on our essay on ecocolonialism and indigenous controlled reserves in Samoa. We largely agree with his points, and hope that our experiences in Samoa may prove informative to others. While our discussion of the historical and philosophical roots of ecocolonialism may prove tedious to some readers, such as Dr Baines, we felt it important to attempt to provide some explanatory framework for the course of recent events concerning the Samoan preserves. The supremacy of Western culture to all indigenous cultures is so deeply assumed by some, that there is conservation efforts, let alone tender them control of conservation efforts as we have sought to do so in Samoa.

Certainly NGOs have an important role in the process of increasing conservation efforts. We earnestly believe that the purpose of conservation can be best served by *respecting* indigenous cultures and village leaders, rather than by trying to erode their traditional cultures. This is particularly true in many islands of the South Pacific, where communal land tenure systems result in crucial resources being controlled by indigenous peoples. We respectfully ask that the scientific and conservation community communicate an increased respect and care for indigenous peoples and traditional leaders in the establishment of new nature reserves.

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The meeting will be of interest to postgraduate and honours students, researchers and professionals in population ecology. A reduced registration fee and some low-cost accommodation will be available for students. The meeting follows the Easter weekend and is in the common University week.

Invited papers will cover theoretical, experimental and applied aspects of modern population ecology. Other participants may present posters on these topics in extended poster sessions. A limited number of contributed papers will be selected from interested participants by an editorial panel. Contributed papers and abstracts from posters will be available at the conference. Invited papers will be published as a special symposium volume. The cost of this volume will be included in the conference registration fee.

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