

## Land, Water and Tourism in Aitutaki, Cook Islands

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### Introduction\*

Most island governments in the South Pacific have placed a great deal of faith in a continued annual increase in numbers of tourists as a guarantee of national economic growth. This is particularly the case in the Cook Islands. The response by local, mostly small-scale entrepreneurs has been to invest in the building of tourist accommodation, not only on the main island of Rarotonga, but also on the island of Aitutaki. Until recently the piecemeal development of accommodation on that island has occurred with little reference to the impact on the environment.

Aitutaki is an atoll of volcanic origin in the Southern Cook Islands, located 259 kilometres north of the main island, Rarotonga. It is higher than most atolls, having Maungapu, a 127 m. hill of old coral in the centre. The island is renowned for the beautiful lagoon, which has a number of uninhabited islets within the reef which encloses the lagoon. The surge in building on Aitutaki has been in response to the Cook Island Government's "push" for tourism development. It is also due to optimism on the part of the accommodation proprietors that, if well-promoted, Aitutaki will have a significant increase in tourist numbers. Most visitors fly to the island for the day (Monday to Saturday) from Rarotonga to take a cruise. They visit some of the islets and snorkel over coral heads which are well populated with fish and, sometimes, turtles.

The Aitutaki Island Council has approved a permit for the building of a new "luxury" hotel, to be sited in part of the Aitutaki lagoon, on the grounds that this enterprise would provide jobs for island residents. There is local concern regarding the impact of this development on fish breeding stocks. There is also strong local concern about the removal of a great deal of land on the island from local ownership and access because of the recent surge in the building of tourist accommodation. Aitutaki people are also apprehensive about the possible impact of increased tourist numbers on the island's infrastructure, particularly on the power and water supplies. The supply of piped water to village households is regularly cut off without warning, partly due to a decrease in water levels in the collection galleries and partly due to the failure of pumping facilities. The Aitutaki community is representative of many small island communities worldwide which, in responding to what they believe to be central government wishes and prompts, may ultimately experience serious economic, environmental and social problems.

### "Resortland"

I have recently arrived back from outer space. Or I might as well have, given that I've been deliberately marooned on a tropical island for the past week, with nothing more to intrude upon my idling mind than the lapping waves against the sand, the clank of rigging against the mast of a yacht moored offshore, and the odd, distant, delighted cry of a child playing in the hotel pool. Yes, it's been hell, but someone has to do it.

I call this place Resortland. It can be anywhere, really, so long as the climate or the landscape or both are conducive to the leisure pursuits of the mobile middle classes. In Resortland there are few clues to your actual location, in the cartographical sense ... it's an international style of marble and chrome and hardwoods and ceiling fans and palm trees and pool bars and swizzle sticks that could be anywhere from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean to the Pacific to South-East Asia and beyond (Macdonald, 2004:C10).

This advertorial style of travel writing commonly appears in New Zealand and Australian daily newspapers as well as in televised travel programmes. The glamorous views of "Resortland" are an important focus for sales by travel agencies to people for whom a hedonistic experience on a tropical island is only the swipe of a credit card away. What was once available only for the rich is now been democratised and the islands of the South Pacific are now competitively marketed as accessible and safe destinations, whether for land tourists or cruise ship passengers.

The islands and their peoples, however, have to provide the playground facilities - the land for the resorts, the water for the swimming pools, the disposal facilities for the sewage and the rubbish, as well as present easily understood displays of local culture. On the positive side they receive a contribution to the national GDP and a proportion of the population have full- and part-time work. However, simultaneously the governments of what are termed Small Island Developing States (SIDS) by the United Nations are also recipients of messages from supra-government agencies such as those of the United Nations Environment Network (UNEP) and the UN Programme for Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS (United Nations, 2005), that they should develop a policy of sustainable development. (See Appendix 1 of this paper).

There are inherent tensions and contradictions in the current emphasis on what has become a somewhat idealized if not fetetized concept, that of sustainable development. The question asked, but not necessarily answered, is this:

Can the concepts of sustainable development, incorporating the protection of island environments, including the conservation of land, of ground water supplies and of island seascapes, be maintained while South Pacific nations such as the Cook Islands simultaneously aim to increase their GDP and local levels of employment by the ongoing expansion of tourism?

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\* Any errors in this paper are my own and not those of people who were kind enough to share information with me. Thanks to the Cook Islands Prime Minister's Office for permission to research in the Cook Islands, and to Queen Manarangi Tutai Ariki and Des Clarke, Vaipae, Aitutaki; Papa Taituria, Papa Tikaka Henry, Messrs. Ron Maki, Putangi Mose Jnr., Rey Puapuii, Bobby Bishop, all of Aituaki; Peter Mason, NIWA, Christchurch.

In a speech made in June 2004, Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated that tourism and its contribution to the economies of SIDS are threatened by overdevelopment, pollution, loss of biodiversity, climate change and beach erosion (Annan, 2004). Cook Islands' politicians, bureaucrats and members of the general population have recognized that their nation is not exempt from these threats. One suggestion for the achievement of sustainable development, currently being promoted in the Cook Islands, is the development of a "better" type of tourism such as eco- and "geo-tourism"; including the provision of local, less luxurious accommodation and village home-stay accommodation.

The main proponent of "Geotourism" (also known as "Ethnic tourism" or "Cultural tourism" in the academic tourism literature) is Dr. Peter Phillips, who is employed as a consultant by the Cook Island Tourism Corporation. In an interview for Radio Australia's Pacific Beat in August 2004 Dr. Phillips described what the term involved. He said that this style of tourism, espoused by the publishers of National Geographic as a way of protecting local environments, would appeal to "interactive travelers" (see Burnford 2004:1). Such people, he said, did not want the "rest and recreation mode" offered by resorts, but were interested in experiencing and learning about "the full range of the local", including flora, fauna, architecture, crafts, cuisine and cultural performances. He describes the concept in more detail in the first report of the findings from consultations with people on ten of the Cook Islands in May, 2004 (Phillips 2004:3-4).

There are wealthy travellers who would be interested in geotourism experiences. However, on the whole, this concept does not fit with the increase in the building of luxurious, over-water accommodation units in resorts in Pacific island groups, and in other island nations. This type of resort was once mainly available for very wealthy people in island groups such as the Maldives and on an island in the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> Now they are common. First established in the South Pacific on the island of Bora Bora in Tahiti, these resorts have been built in Vanuatu, most recently in New Caledonia (Coral Palms Island Resort), and one is planned for Aitutaki in the Cook Islands. A holiday at one of these resorts is now within the financial reach of many people in Australia and in New Zealand.

### Experts afloat in the Pacific (and drifting past each other)

The information outlined below will not come as a surprise to anyone with an interest in environmental issues in small Pacific islands nations. There are a range of experts such as meteorologists, hydrologists, environmentalists, agronomists, disaster experts and development planners, both indigenous and expatriate, who work in the Pacific and who could contribute part of the narrative. Our interests are similar in that we wish to enable people to have a better quality of life. However, people like myself, an anthropologist, do not often meet with these specialists.

We may just miss each other as we visit island communities for field research. The experts also do not necessarily meet with each other unless they are employed by the same organisation or regularly participate in international conferences. There are other individuals who have contributed to the present situation, including the foreign economists who advised the Cook Islands Government to undertake drastic economic reforms in 1995. A number of consultants have written reports on the economic possibilities of increased tourism in that nation<sup>2</sup> and there have been a variety of other consultants, funded by foreign aid programmes to do a variety of assessments. Again, we do not meet each other except perhaps at conferences or as our paths accidentally cross during our stay in the islands. Then there are the Cook Islanders themselves, both expatriate and resident, many of whom hope and plan for an economically viable future life for themselves and their families on their home islands.

Local issues with the inadequacies of the water supply were not the anticipated beginning point of a period of field research in the Cook Islands in February to April, 2004. I had gone there primarily to observe tourist development on Aitutaki. I had chosen Aitutaki as my base because people from that island who live in Hamilton, New Zealand, had concerns about the rumours of the proposed construction of a luxury over-water hotel, known at the time as the "Captain Cook Hotel", adjacent to a wetland area which runs parallel to the first airport runway.<sup>3</sup> The lagoon waters that would front the hotel are not suitable for swimming and are part of an area on which a local protection order (*rahui*) was placed to enable fish stocks to regenerate. The plan would involve part of the lagoon being dredged to deepen the water level.

There has been a tendency in tourism planning worldwide to assume that tourism is a "good" which will directly or indirectly benefit most of the residents of the favoured community. In the case of Aitutaki a very small portion of the population derive their main source of income from tourism, as owners of accommodation; as suppliers of goods, such as the owners of grocery shops, souvenir shops and mixed businesses; suppliers of services such as cruise and other boats and the hiring of cars and mopeds; as proprietors of bars and cafes; or as employees of these businesses. A slightly larger group of people, including families with children, earn small amounts of money as part-time entertainers, performing in dance troupes or in string bands. A small number of men sell fish and seasonally grown vegetables to the hotels and restaurants. The remainder of the population are dependent on income derived from Government employment, on subsistence agriculture, and on remittances from family members in Australia and New Zealand.

### Tourism in the Cook Islands

<sup>1</sup> Kurosawa, Susan, "Hydro Therapy", Weekend Australian, May 22-23, 2004, Travel Section, p.1. She writes: "Over, in, on – no matter the description, this is the tropic resort world's most coveted accommodation. Distilled to its bare (thatched, fan-cooled, super-comfy) basics, the overwater bungalow does not, as the description suggests, loom over the water, but crouches lightly in it, on stilts. The bungalow could be a villa, a *bure*, a *fare*, or a *fale*, depending which particular satellite of paradise you are in. ... the illusion is of semi-isolation, the lagoon as a boundless ensuite pool".

<sup>2</sup> "Elements of the [Cook Island Tourism] Masterplan were implemented directly by the Tourist Authority under assistance provided by the then NZODA [New Zealand Official Development Assistance, the New Zealand Agency for International Development] Tourism Masterplan Implementation Programme". The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, "Tourism Master Plan Update", *Drumbeats*, May/June, 2004, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Tim Tepaki, the entrepreneur, has been reported as saying that the Cook Island market had to expand to incorporate more luxury standard accommodation which would be available for \$500-1500 a night. "...Tepaki perceived Aitutaki to be the jewel in the scheme of future development ... You've got to have the best to offer". The Cook Islands Independent, Issue 84, February 14, 2004, p.3.

In 1995 the Cook Islands already had a large tourism sector and it was emphasised that the expansion of this sector was essential for the economic survival of the nation. Continued expansion occurred during the past decade. In 2003 78,328 people visited the Cook Islands (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website, sub-section "Statistics"). In December 2003 the Government reported that:

The tourism industry has led the growth of the Cook Islands economy for the past 20 years with an average growth in visitor arrivals for the period 1987 to 2000 of 6.3% and contribution to GDP for the same period increasing from 27% to 51%. Tourism revenues have grown in nominal terms from \$20 million in 1997 to over \$81 million in 2000 (Government of the Cook Islands, 2003a:31)

Following an extensive consultation process with members of communities in ten of the Cook Islands it has been concluded that:

...there is no clear vision for the future of tourism in this country ... we have had what the National Geographic Society calls 'destination style drift' towards being a 'rest and recreation' destination which is hard for the outsider to tell from any other white sand and palm tree place in the Pacific, Indian Ocean, or Caribbean....the recommendation from the consultation phase is that we need to focus our efforts on developing a style of tourism that sustains and enhances the well being of resident Cook Islanders and their environment, culture and heritage (Cook Island Tourism Corporation 2004:1).

Concern was expressed during the Cook Islands 1st National Development Forum held in November 2003 regarding the disproportionate amount of foreign owned businesses. in the country, particularly in Rarotonga. In the nine years since 1996 45 per cent of the businesses registered with the Cook Islands Development Investment Board had foreign investors (Government of the Cook Islands, 2004a:10). Further, "65 per cent of accredited resorts and self catering accommodation on Rarotonga are owned by foreign interests" (Government of the Cook Islands, 2004a:10). The effect of this, combined with substantial out-migration from 1995 onwards, has caused a significant erosion of the indigenous (Maori) culture.

The lack of an environmental strategy linked to tourism development was criticised during sessions of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation-sponsored Cook Islands Tourism Forum, held in Rarotonga, 3-4 December 2002. A staff member of the Cook Islands' Government Environment Service stated: "The reality is that while many people talk about conserving the environment we face major difficulty in achieving compliance". He blamed "The absence of regulations, ignoring of strategies such as the Tourism Master Plan, National Environmental Management Strategy 1994, and the Rarotonga Environment Act 1994" (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation 2003:77-78).

Environmental matters have become subject to greater regulation in the Cook Islands since November 19, 2003 when the Cook Islands Government brought into law an Environment Act. This Act gives greater powers to the Island Environment Officers who work in conjunction with local committees, the Island Environment Authorities as well as Island Councils. A requirement of this Act is that any developer applying for a permit will have to obtain an environmental impact assessment report. Plans for resort developments are also displayed in government offices to enable members of the public to see them and lodge objections.

In 1995 the Cook Islands government restructured the public service by halving the number of employees. This action was in response to the recommendations of foreign economic consultants that there was an urgent need for financial reform. At the time it was anticipated that some of the public servants who had been made redundant would, following a government-sponsored transition programme, become small business proprietors, perhaps particularly becoming involved in tourism ventures. Some did, but many emigrated with their families to New Zealand and to Australia. The population decreased by approximately 16 per cent. In 2001 the population was 14,990, with 63 per cent of the population classed as "urban".

Income in the form of remittances and gifting in cash and kind from expatriate Cook Islanders is important for the national economy.. The government also receives aid funding from, among other countries, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, The People's Republic of China, France, the Asia Development Bank and the European Commission.

### **Aitutaki**

Aitutaki has a resident population of around 1400. Many former residents live and work in Rarotonga or in Australia or New Zealand. Most of the island households maintain strong links with expatriate members of their families overseas. In 2004 "mature" tourist accommodation was available on the island in the form of two "luxury" hotels and a "luxury" resort. The older of the two hotels, the Aitutaki Resort and Spa, was built twenty years ago and has eight bungalows with part of their verandas built over the waters of the lagoon. In 2004 these cost visitors \$1590 per night, but other bungalows on the property are about a third of this.

There are twenty businesses offering six to eighteen self-contained accommodation units, variously termed "lodges", "villas" or "bungalows", in a price range from \$30-\$200 per night. Most such units have fans and solar water heaters, and the more expensive have air-conditioning. Some of the small tourist properties have composting toilets and rain water tanks. Although the usual tourist facilities, such as cafes, are few, Aitutaki clearly gives tourists a high level of aesthetic and experiential satisfaction. A search for Aitutaki via Google found many tourist "blogs" describing people's experiences. I also found high levels of satisfaction in fifty interviews which I had with visiting tourists.

Most of the small scale tourism accommodation businesses are owned and managed by a husband and wife, who employ one or two workers as cleaners. At least one of each of these partners was born on Aitutaki; several of the spouses are from New Zealand, Australia, or in one case, Tonga. The oldest of these businesses, a guest house, was established twenty-four years ago and the second oldest eighteen years ago. In both these cases the business of renting accommodation began almost accidentally in that it seemed logical to do this during the periods the houses were not being used by their owners who were living and working in New Zealand.

In 2003/2004 approvals were granted for the building of three new complexes. Two of these comprised twelve stand-alone units, with eight stand alone units in another. The quality and aesthetic appeal of these constructions varied. The new constructions are comprised of clusters of small, detached buildings which are located on sites fronting or close to the lagoon. Two of these sets of units have the

appearance of sheds or garages, as do a number located on other sites. That is, they are rectangular, with small windows and fronted by a verandah.

The builders of the newer accommodation on Aitutaki have invested large amounts of money because of their belief that there will be a continuous increase in the number of tourists visiting Aitutaki. This view was optimistic in that in 2004 the daily occupancy rate was quite low (30-40 per cent). The low occupancy rate was attributed by some proprietors to the fact that there are well-patronised day trips for tourists who are flown over from Rarotonga to cruise and snorkel in the lagoon. Nevertheless, there is a steady flow of visitors who stay for three to five days. However, this flow is seasonal and there is local speculation that many of the new developments may often be empty. However, in late 2003 the then Prime Minister, Robert Woonton, during the opening of the Aitutaki airport runway extension, predicted that large-capacity planes would soon be landing there carrying large numbers of tourists travelling direct from the U.S.A. and Canada.

The piecemeal development of accommodation on Aitutaki has, until recently, occurred with little reference to environmental issues, including the protection of the coastal landscapes, maintenance of the quality of the water in the lagoon and the capacity of the local water supply. In 2003 the Aitutaki Island Council approved the permit for the new luxury hotel on the grounds that such a hotel would provide jobs for island residents. This is questionable as many of the residents in the employable age group live either in Rarotonga or overseas.

### Water and land issues

It is water – the lagoon – which attracts tourists to Aitutaki. The lagoon offers many recreational opportunities, including sailing, fishing, snorkelling and simply relaxing, while looking at the ever changing vistas. However, it is fresh water, or lack of it, that has caused local concern about the impact of increased tourist numbers on the island's infrastructure, particularly on the water supply. Many members of the population have worked and lived in New Zealand and in Australia. They live in modern style bungalows and have become used to having indoor bathrooms and constant supplies of water. In 2003 there was a well publicised campaign by the Ministry for Sustainable Development and the Environment to encourage household members to conserve water.

Many households on Aitutaki have rain water collection tanks and a Canadian aid-funded scheme is in the offing which will involve assisting others to obtain tanks. At present the water which is piped, free of charge, to island households, most of which have flush toilets and showers, is drawn from collection galleries 290 metres long in an area known as Vaipeka. The collection galleries contain accumulated seepage of groundwater from the hills behind them. The water is pumped to three large water tanks and then piped to households. The water tanks were built with Australian government aid in the 1980s and 1990s and the Vaipeka galleries were renovated and extended in the 1990s also with funding from AUSAID. Most owner/builders of tourist accommodation have large rainwater tanks with pumps to supply the bungalows/units, but some have also built their own wells to tap into and pump out supplies of groundwater. Some of these businesses also utilise the free piped water.

Up until May 23, 2004 there had been no public meeting of Aitutaki people to enable them to discuss the implications of the accelerated building program or the possibility of one or even other luxury hotels being constructed in the near future. There was a groundswell of dissent but this tended to be expressed in private conversations. (see Cowling 2005, in press). There was particular concern about the way in which family leaseholds have been purchased and sometimes sold on to investors, both Cook Island and foreign. Extended family land holdings, including sites on the islets in the lagoon, vary in size. The smallest is about quarter of an acre, and they are often dispersed in different locations on the island.

Land is currently used for house-lots and for agriculture, although many hectares are currently uncultivated because the owners live overseas. Fallowing is also practised. Officially and traditionally, land cannot be sold. Pieces of land, ranging in size from half-an-acre to several acres can be leased to a family or non-family member for sixty years, provided a majority of the members of an extended family [kainga] who live on the island agree. Aitutaki residents can represent non-resident land owners living in say, Australia or New Zealand, in this process. The would-be lessee has to state whether the intended use of the land is for building a house or for agricultural or commercial purposes. The former is the most common form of land transfer. The lease can be reviewed within five or fifteen years. Originally, the payment by a resident of Aitutaki for such a lease was \$1.00 per annum, but it is understood that outsiders would pay more.

Many expatriate Cook Islanders hope, at some time, to retire and return home. A number of partially built homes which can be seen on Aitutaki are testament to this hope. As families accumulate savings they arrange for containers of building materials to be delivered to the island and then spend a short period on the island supervising the construction. A few of the guest houses on Aitutaki were built by the owners in this way and were then turned into budget accommodation for tourists.

### Conclusion

People can hardly be blamed for wanting to remain in their home islands and earn a living and tourism ventures have seemed to be a viable way of doing so. The problems inherent in encouraging visits to Aitutaki by greater numbers of tourists have been acknowledged in reports to the Cook Islands Government. Some "rationing" has been suggested, with a figure of 500 per day perceived as the maximum appropriate for visitors staying overnight in accommodation on Aitutaki (Rey Puapii, Aitutaki Tourism Officer, *pers. comm.* March 2004).

The local concerns about the alienation of land have been noted by Government agencies. The Economic Focus Group in November 2003 when reporting their findings to the 1st National Development Forum noted that there was "Continuing uncertainty and tensions over land, especially on Rarotonga and Aitutaki" (Government of the Cook Islands, 2003c:2-8). The Law and Governance Focus Group reported that "Land issues have become critical with more Cook Islanders becoming disenfranchised from their land". Additionally, this Group reported that "Disparity will continue to grow between Rarotonga and the Outer Islands and within the Outer Islands with continued division amongst decision makers on matters such as traditional titles, religion and sport, affecting the cooperative effects of governance. The Infrastructure Group reported that that the supply of accessible safe water was inadequate.

An ideal picture of the future has been articulated by planners and politicians in the Cook Islands in their recent discussions, together with a long list of priorities. (Government of the Cook Islands 2003c). However, it seems unlikely, given the shaky start of a coalition

of politicians in a “Government of National Unity” in November 2004, that sufficient and speedy action will be taken in the near future in the ways in which many people would wish.

The promotion of geotourism may or may not assist the small business owners of Aitutaki. Perhaps it may generate assistance to encourage and enable local people to restore aspects of the island’s environment, including wetland areas, and slow the pollution and despoliation of the lagoon. It is clear that the local people should be kept better informed by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and the Island Council on decisions being made about tourism ventures, such as the proposed luxury hotel, rather than reading the news in the Cook Island newspapers or sharing misinformation in the local stores. This may help persuade them to see the possible benefits of tourism for all. They would need a guarantee of government support (such as improving water supply) to ensure their quality of life will not be impaired. Any degree of commitment however, will be affected by the fact that many local people have the option of (regretfully) leaving the island (for Rarotonga) and the Cook Islands for countries such as New Zealand on a short and long term basis. In the meantime travel agents, airlines and tourism accommodation proprietors continue to promote the Cook Islands, including Aitutaki, as a destination which offer leisure and luxury and as places which are not far away from an earthly paradise

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## Appendix 1:

United Nations, “Making tourism more sustainable”: Small Islands Stakes, Press Release #2, International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Mauritius, 10-14 January 2005, [www.un.org/smallislands2005](http://www.un.org/smallislands2005).

Islands are a natural attraction for tourists, and this in turn generates jobs and much-needed revenue. But the tourism industry has reached such a scale that it endangers those very ecosystems and cultures that attract tourists.

Tourism needs to be made more sustainable, to better benefit small island nations while protecting their culture and traditions, and to effectively conserve and manage freshwater and other natural resources. The continuing challenge for small islands is to establish the appropriate balance between tourism development and that of other sectors of the economy, given the limits of their carrying capacity and the fact that the tourism sector places demands on other sectors of the economy. The impact of tourism on the economy of small islands depends on the proportion of funds that are retained within the local economy. Small islands see the best ways to maximize their own economic gains, given that their tourism industries are often dominated by foreign companies.

Tourism is also sensitive to external shocks, as shown by the reduction in the numbers of tourists, and the revenues they provide to SIDS, following the terrorist attacks against New York and Bali, and during the SARS health crisis in 2003.