

BY DOUGLAS H. CHADWICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDY OLSON

THE SAM

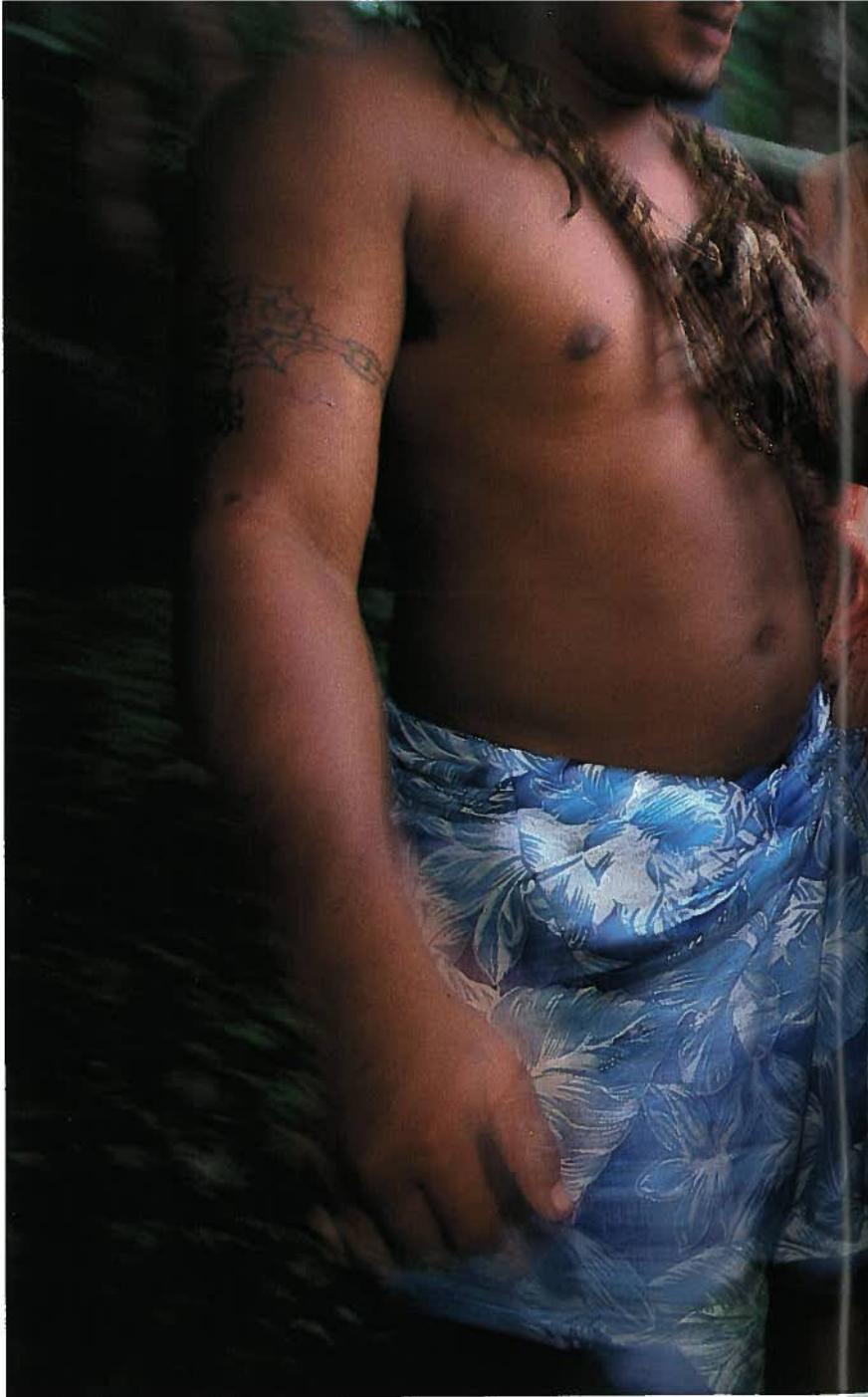
A NEW U.S.
NATIONAL PARK
PRESERVES A
PRISTINE
TROPICAL
ECOSYSTEM.

A full-page photograph of a diver underwater in a coral reef. The diver is in the foreground, wearing a dark blue and black patterned shirt and dark shorts. He is holding a small object, possibly a clam or sea urchin, in his right hand. The water is clear, showing the sandy bottom and various coral structures. In the background, a large, dark mountain rises from the water's edge under a blue sky with some clouds. The title 'OANWAY' is overlaid in large white letters across the middle of the image.

OANWAY

Shopping for dinner, a diver hunts clams and sea urchins off Ofu Island, whose coral reef lies within the park's 10,500 acres. Only residents may fish this sanctuary in American Samoa, the first U.S. national park in the Southern Hemisphere.

Dressed out for the occasion, a wedding gift is toted to a reception on Tutuila Island. An occasion at which extravagant gift giving is expected is referred to as fa'alavelave, a term that can mean "generosity," "obligation," or "troublesome."



A THIRD OF OUR PLANET IS PACIFIC OCEAN. Away out in that undulating blueness, 2,600 miles southwest of Hawaii and 1,800 miles north-east of New Zealand, appears the small island known as Ofu. Built of soaring black stone, it is robed in rain forest and further softened by summit mists from which waterfalls spill back down toward the sea.

I lie floating a few feet from shore, fingertips lightly anchored



in sand. Inches from the bottom half of my diving mask, long-nose filefish cruise over coral colonies.

I keep the top half of my mask above the water, watching raindrops pock the surface. Beyond, palm fronds sweep over a white beach where Ofu tapers toward the storm-blue spires of its sister isle, Olosega. There is nobody on the shore, only fat coconut crabs clawing their way into fallen coconuts to gorge

on the sweet coatings inside. I could stay like this for hours—and do, in one of the newest, most unusual, and least familiar additions to the U.S. National Park System, the National Park of American Samoa. The entrance signs, in Samoan, read *Paka o Amerika Samoa* with the subtitle *Laufanua Fa'asaoina*, or preserved land.

SAMOA ITSELF is said to mean “sacred center.” It is an archipelago strung along an east-west axis roughly 14 degrees south of the Equator. According to geologists the coral-fringed islands are the tops of volcanoes that rose from the seafloor, hissing and streaming lava as crustal plates shifted below. An older story is that this is where the world began as the creator, Tagaloalagi, first called forth earth, sea, and sky from rock. Then, the Samoan legend continues, he made the first human being.

Anthropologists also view the Samoan islands in terms of origins. Language links and artifacts suggest that the first distinctly Polynesian culture may have developed here some 3,000 years ago. Over the centuries that followed, seafarers in double-hulled sailing vessels stocked with pigs, dogs, and fruits spread that culture across much of the Pacific, colonizing points as distant as Hawaii, New Zealand, and Easter Island.

During the modern colonial era the western end of the Samoan chain fell under Germany’s control, then New Zealand’s. In 1962 it became the independent nation of Western Samoa, now known simply as Samoa. The U.S. took possession of the eastern half of the archipelago in 1900. Its largest island is Tutuila, where the Navy maintained a base at Pago Pago harbor until 1951. Sixty miles east rise Ofu, Olosega, and Ta’ū, the islands collectively known as Manu’a, revered in legend as the birthplace of Polynesia and long a powerful kingdom in its own right.

Together with another small island and two coral atolls, Tutuila and the Manu’a group make up the U.S. Territory of American Samoa, current population about 64,000. Overseen by the Department of the Interior, the territory has its own legislature, an elected governor, and a nonvoting representative to Congress. Today it also has a 10,500-acre national park, a quarter of which extends from the beaches out to sea.

The United States’ only parkland in the Southern Hemisphere was created to protect three kinds of communities under pressure from modern forces. First is the paleotropical rain forest, where the flora and fauna stem mainly from Southeast Asia, forming habitats unique within the U.S. park system. Second is the Indo-Pacific coral reef, markedly richer in species than reefs in other ocean regions. Third, bound to both rain forest and reef, is the indigenous Polynesian culture. The crafts,



Scale varies in this perspective.
60 miles from
Tutuila to Manu'a

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAPS
RELIEF BY JOHN BONNER





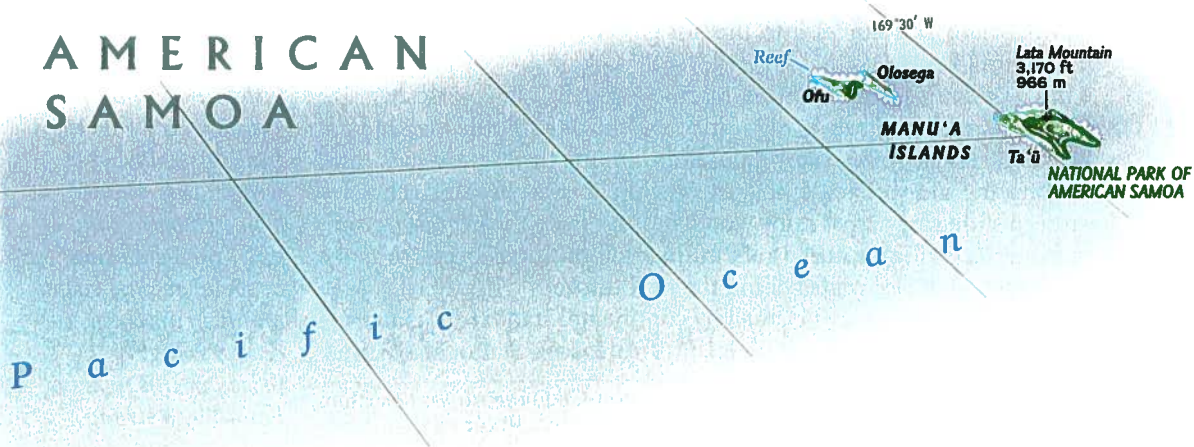
customs, and knowledge that define *fa'aSāmoa*, the Samoan way, are among this park's most valuable living resources.

Authorized in 1988, Paka o Amerika Samoa is still very much a work in progress. It wasn't officially dedicated until 1997 and probably sees fewer than 500 tourists from outside the islands in the course of a year. Although a modest headquarters and visitor center have opened at Pago Pago, the territorial capital, there are no patrol rangers, entrance stations, or trails yet, just a tiny staff at work on a vast store of possibilities.

Ta'ū is formed by the tallest peak in American Samoa, 3,170-foot Lata Mountain. The clouds that almost perpetually shroud the volcano's heights may loose as much as 300 inches of rain yearly, while the sunlit lower slopes steam in greenhouse profusion. Sweating his way uphill, Chris Stein, the park superintendent (soon to take a new park position stateside), whispers, "We'll probably put a trail into this area

Rain forest blankets the volcanic islands of this U.S. territory (map). The park aims at protecting coral reefs, Samoan culture, and rain forest flora and fauna, including the flying fox bat (above), whose wingspan reaches three feet.

AMERICAN SAMOA



but maybe not right here. You can see why." Before us gapes a side crater whose whole interior is aswirl with chittering mammals aloft on three-foot wingspans. Despite our efforts to sneak up undetected, we have disrupted the daytime roost of fruit bats known as white-necked flying foxes.

A more elusive fruit bat, the Samoan flying fox, is normally active during the day, soaring over the forest canopy like a hawk. Folktales cast these animals as guardians of the forest. Ecologically, they fill that role. The only land-dwelling mammals other than the sheath-tailed bat to occur naturally in Samoa, they help maintain the woodlands by pollinating and distributing the seeds of a large proportion of the islands' vegetation.

Hunters with modern weapons put heavy pressure on the big bats. Habitat loss made matters worse in neighboring Samoa. Nearly two-thirds of the original forests there have been cut for timber and cleared for agriculture. Then a series of hurricanes beat down the depleted populations of white-necked and Samoan flying foxes to perilously low levels. The desire to save these two important species—together with the islands' native vegetation—was a major factor in the push for a national park.

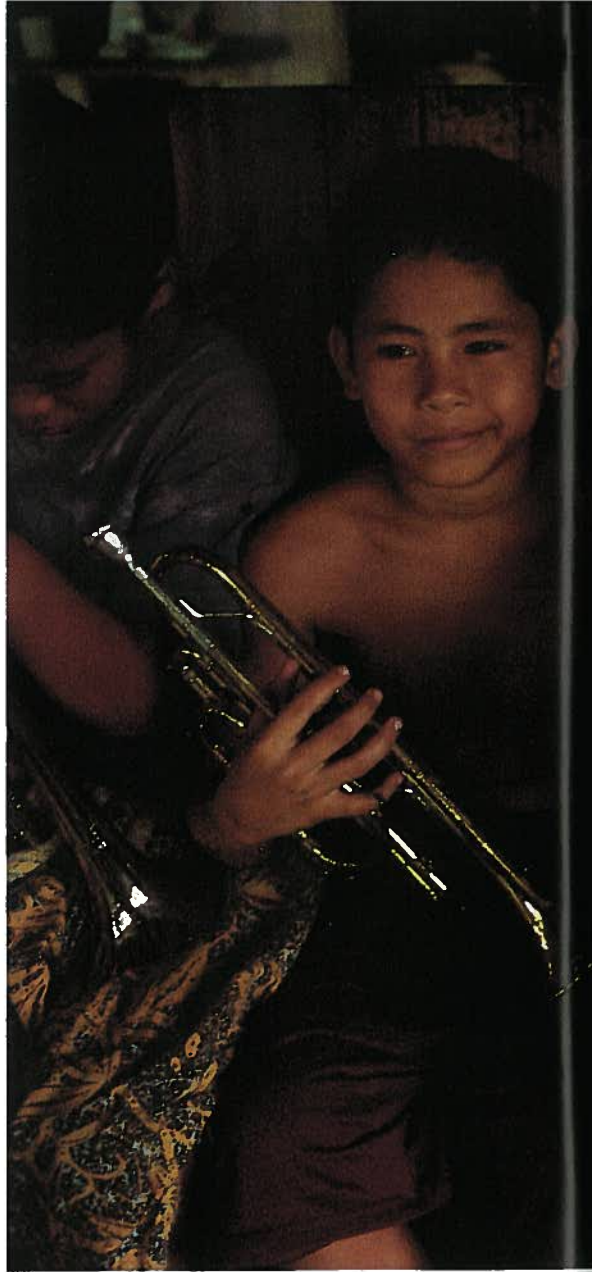
STEIN AND I hike on to a larger side crater. As we descend into the sunken valley, tendrils of mist from Lata's summit come coiling down our way. Cries of white-tailed tropicbirds echo strangely off the sheer sidewalls. Deeper yet, the air stills, and the place takes on the feel of a world apart. Vines close around us. Thirty-foot-tall tree ferns claim the light overhead.

"This," Stein announces into the hot gloom, "is where we keep our tyrannosaurs."

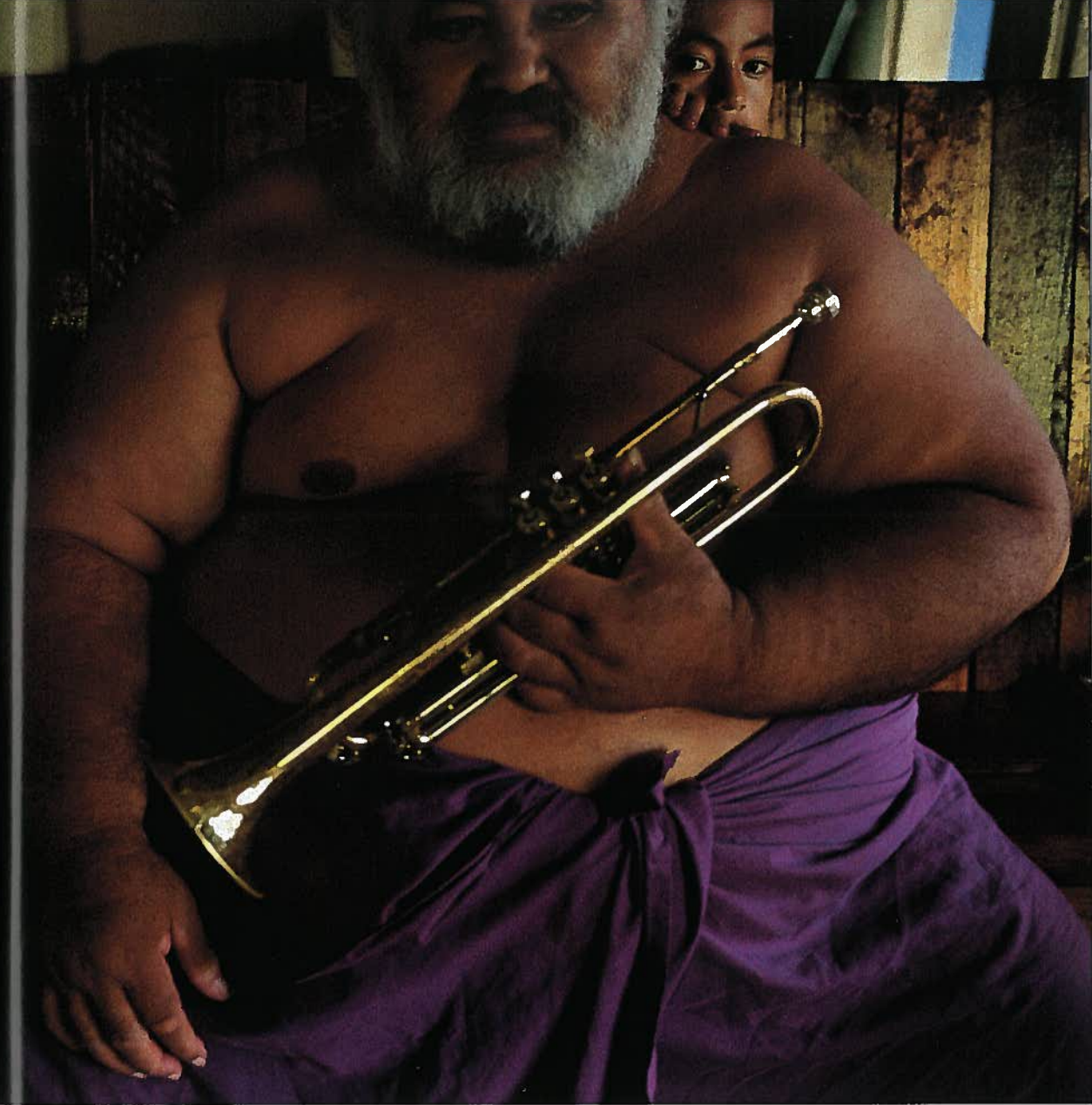
Joking of course. Not counting marine types, like the footlocker-size sea turtle I watched graze on algae in a bay, the only reptiles around are skinks and geckos. And snakes. Ta'ū, alone among the islands, has a few, including the native Pacific boa. Meanwhile, big freshwater eels have been seen slithering across rainy woodlands far from the nearest stream, sometimes carrying captured rats in their jaws. It does begin to make you wonder what else waits behind the next thicket.

Although the park may be small by continental standards, its marine segments run along almost 15 percent of American Samoa's coastline,

Since 1977 DOUGLAS CHADWICK's work for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC has taken him from Arctic wilderness to the coral reefs of the Philippines. RANDY OLSON's last assignment for the magazine was "Indus Civilization," in the June 2000 issue.

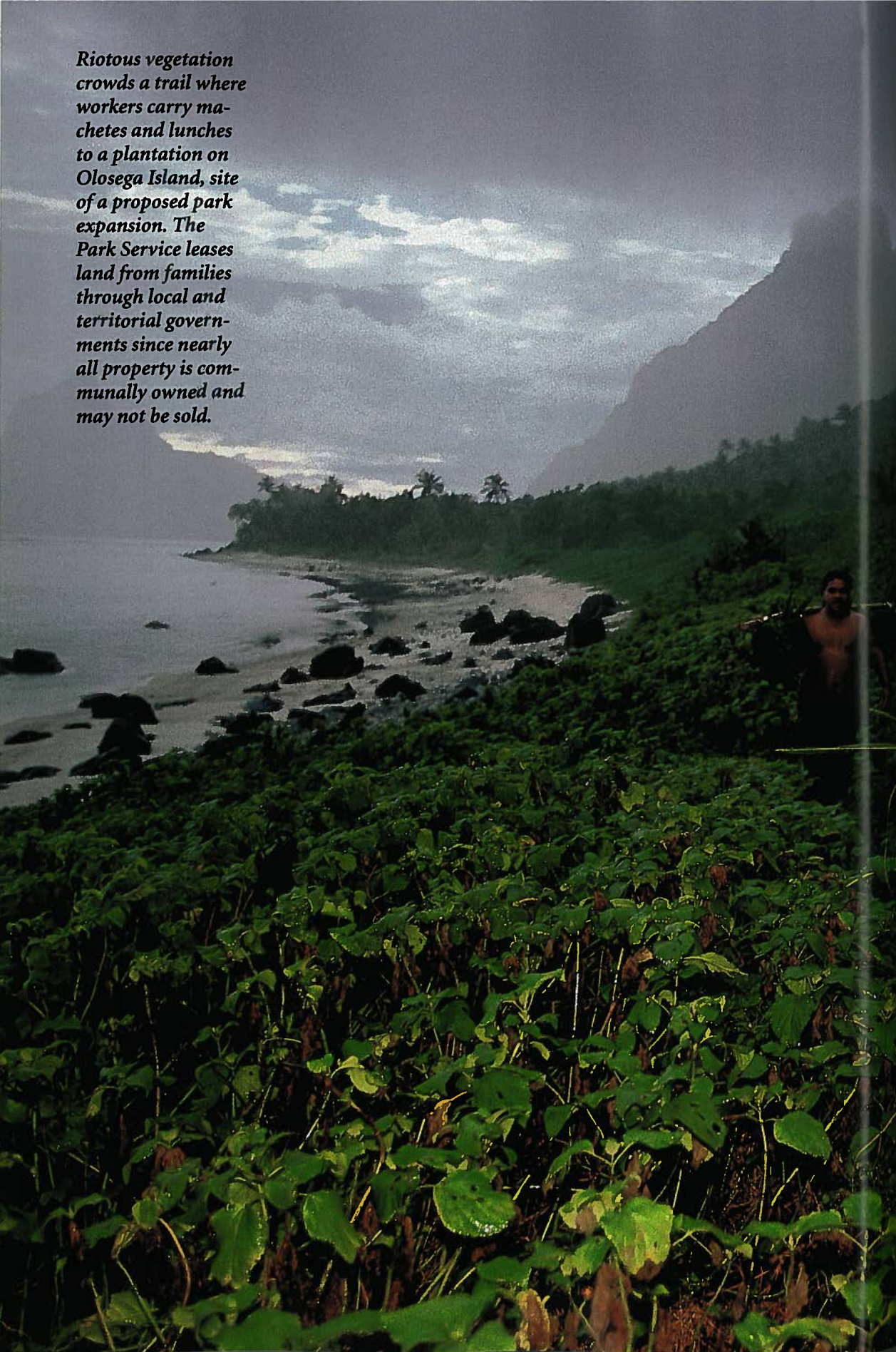


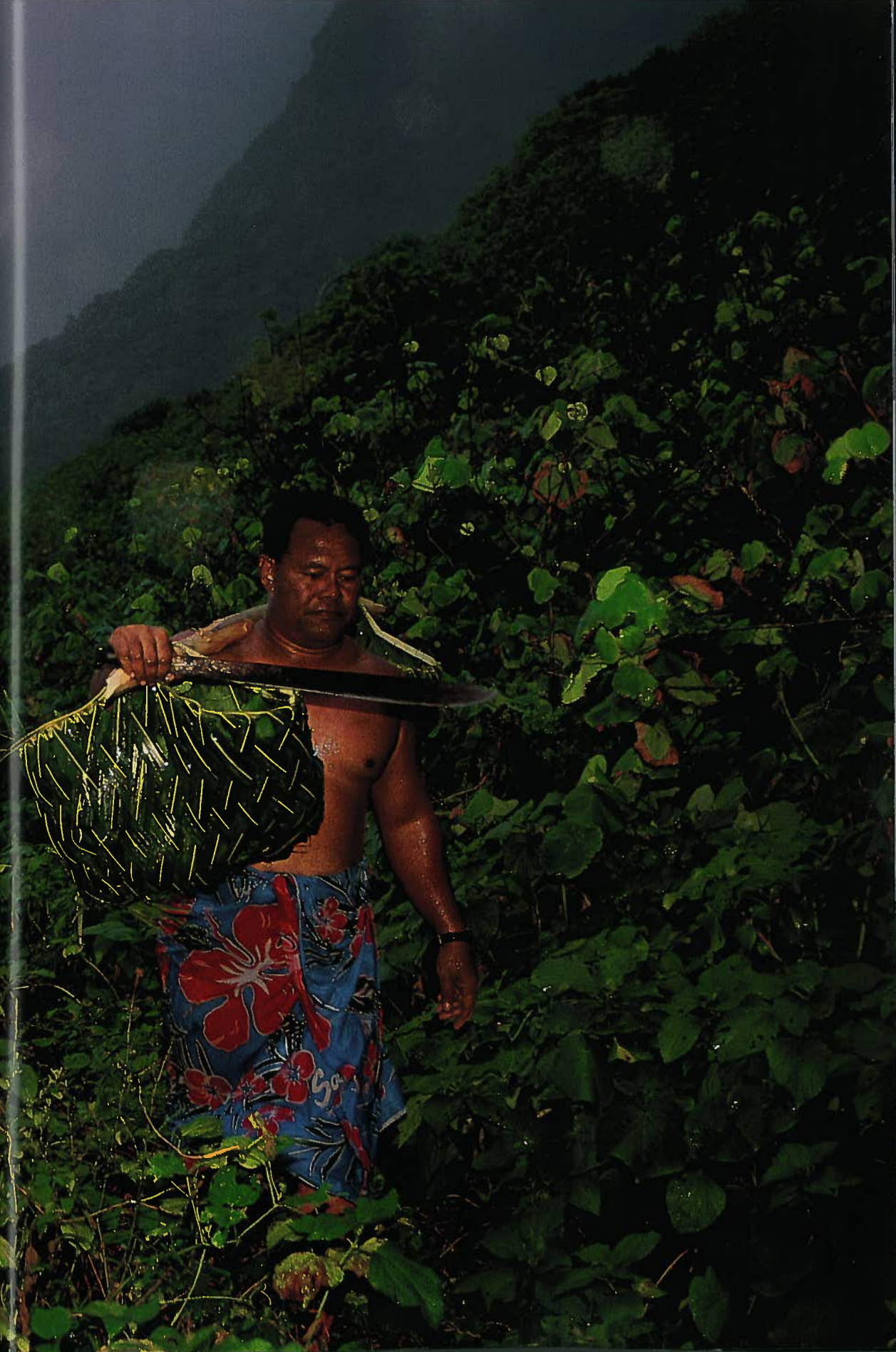
Budding musicians learn from their father, Fiatamali'i Leuta, who wears the traditional lavalava wrap. Leuta heads a church band that plays modern tunes at social events. Vocal and instrumental ability is highly prized in this society, bound by a strong oral tradition.



NOBODY SINGS ABOUT
PARADISE AS BEAUTIFULLY AS THESE
PEOPLE ALREADY LIVING IN ONE.

Riotous vegetation crowds a trail where workers carry machetes and lunches to a plantation on Olosega Island, site of a proposed park expansion. The Park Service leases land from families through local and territorial governments since nearly all property is communally owned and may not be sold.







while the land pieces add up to more than 16 percent of the territory's total land area of 77 square miles, a larger proportion than national parks cover in any U.S. state.

How can this be when virtually no federally owned acreage exists in American Samoa? The islands for the most part are the communal property of extended Samoan families and by law cannot be transferred or sold to outsiders. The territorial government has jurisdiction over the nearshore waters. Forced to get creative, the Park Service leased the marine areas and several small land parcels from the territory, then proceeded to lease the bulk of the park's land from eight different villages.

“OUR MEETING IS AS SACRED as the tips of two clouds passing in the sky. Our meeting is as the joining of sea turtles, silent, motionless, and sacred. Our meeting is as sacred as the first dew. . . .” Not having mastered the Samoan language, I can't tell if this is exactly what is being said. But I know that such phrases are favored in formal Samoan speech, which is an art in itself. And in the village of Vatia on Tutuila's north shore, we are beginning one of the most formal occasions of all, an *'ava* ceremony.

Every village has its own orator, a high-talking chief. The words of this one braid together long, shining strands of family ancestry and spiritual forces. He also speaks of everyday affairs on behalf of the high



Welcoming glow at twilight bathes a combination social center and meeting-house in the village of Sa'ilele.

When dry, pandanus leaves (right) will be made into mats for sitting and sleeping. Fine mats of narrow, tightly woven strips are given as gifts and used as currency in this legendary birth-place of Polynesian culture.

chief. Wearing little but traditional tattoos and the skirt-like wraps known as lavalavas, these and other ranking men sit at one end of a big oval house open to the bay on one side, to towering emerald slopes on the other, to a wind carrying scents of salt mixed with blossoms. I sit in my lavalava at the opposite end next to Chris Stein and Leota Vaea AINU'u, then the park's chief (and only) ranger and a high-talking chief himself, by wooden posts reserved for honored guests.

According to legend the original 'ava ceremony took place between the first man and the creator, who prepared a drink from roots of the kava, a type of pepper plant. Offering this astringent, brown, slightly numbing beverage has been a symbol of welcome and communion ever since. While the untitled men of Vatia prepare a feast outside, a ceremonial virgin in feathered headdress squeezes juice from the kava root into a carved bowl. A man serves the result to me in a sweeping flourish accompanied by a warrior's whoop.

I hold the bowl up in thanks and then drain it in one draught. Noble words flow along with gifts of cloth and fine, woven mats. Next come banana-leaf platters of suckling pig, fish, breadfruit, papaya, taro root, baked coconut cream, all in portions too generous to finish.

"What God has given us, we are happy to share with others," proclaims Tuiasosopo, the orator. He isn't referring to the bounty dripping from our chins though. He means the lands and waters that have become the park.

People who have land within this contractual park not only get to divide up annual lease payments but also may continue to gather wild foods and other natural materials from the woods and waters. Subsistence farming is also allowed as long as it's limited to land that's been farmed in the past. Noncommercial fishing is OK, as is the construction of traditional shelters for farmers. From 1993, when the final wording was agreed upon, the lease contract runs for 50 years and is subject to renewal by mutual consent. In the meantime any family that grows dissatisfied with the arrangement may withdraw its land from the park with a year's notice.

This arrangement is something of a gamble, given that parks are supposed to safeguard certain values in perpetuity. Concerned that a year could be too short a time for working out problems that might arise with leases, one senior Park Service planner describes the new park as







“slippery.” On the positive side, Paka o Amerika Samoa expands the concept of parklands—and the possibilities for making more of them. It could prove to be a model for conserving nature hand in hand with a thriving culture.

WHEN I LEAVE Vatia village to explore the park near Mount ‘Alava, the heavens pour rain thick as drapery. The steep, machete-cut path down Levaga Ridge turns to goo. Never have I sunk so far in status so fast, from feasted dignitary to bedraggled butt slider with one hand clawing mud and the other flailing for branches to grab. Yet the air is warm as ever, and I take comfort knowing that this kind of wet built the surrounding forest of trees heavysset with orchids and twisting lianas. Wild ginger blossoms burn orange in the understory. Samoans use gel-like sap from the buds as shampoo. Since I’m already showering, I go ahead and soap my head.

Siaifoi Fa‘aumu of the territory’s Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources points out a bird’s nest fern, one of 230 species of ferns and their close relatives found on the Samoan islands. In the center of its broad leaves is a young brown booby, looking as if it had sprouted right there. A step beyond, the ridge falls away at a sheer cliff. I can see boobies, frigatebirds, and fairy terns riding the sea winds back from fishing sites while waves break a hundred feet straight down past my feet.

Here on the island’s steep slopes the rain forest structure has remained largely intact—spared the logging and intensive agriculture that, in Samoa and other South Pacific islands with more accessible terrain, have shed silt and agrochemicals onto coral reefs offshore.

The reef in the park along Ofu is a filigreed labyrinth of at least 64 different varieties of corals, from azure-tinged mushrooms to char-treuse vases. Boulder corals hundreds of years old bulge big as whales. I free-dive the underwater channels between them, gawking at unicorn-fish, a banded snake eel, green sea turtles. Gradually the reef reveals itself to be a collection of highly organized neighborhoods.

One type of staghorn coral resembles stalagmites rising from a tabletop. Minnow-size damselfish school around the coral structure like haze. When alarmed, they withdraw in a flash to crowd among the stalagmites, turning them a quivering black and blue.

Napping after church, these teenagers have grown up in what to outsiders seems like paradise, but American Samoa is not the Eden of free love it was once believed to be. Nineteenth-century missionaries found that local mores meshed with their own, and Christian churches like Sa‘ilele’s Congregational parish (above) have multiplied.



Wandering the beach the next day, I encounter Mafuta Tili Vo'a, a woman who collects wild plants for the practice of *fofō*, Samoa's traditional art of healing. Her mother, a midwife, taught her the use of herbs and ways to exorcise troublesome spirits. Now middle-aged, Mafuta is passing on the knowledge to her own children. "Sometimes nurses send patients from the clinic over to me," she says. "It isn't enough just to know the plant medicines. You also have to feel God working through you. If you don't pray, you can't have a good *fofō*."

Mafuta embodies American Samoa's fusion of Polynesian traditions and Christian teachings. Missionaries reached the islands more than a century ago, and churches have since come to play such a prominent role in village life that the territory has been called the Bible Belt of the South Seas. This is at odds with the region's reputation for being short on clothing and inhibitions, an image woven from lusty sailors' tales and later reinforced by Margaret Mead's widely read book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which dealt with adolescent sexuality.

Many a traveler is taken aback to find that it is considered offensive here for women to wear shorts or skimpy tops, much less bathing suits. And one mustn't swim or indulge in any other form of recreation near villages on Sundays, set aside for family visits, feasting, and worship.

Judging from the services I attend, nobody sings about Paradise quite as beautifully as these people already living in one. And every weekday



Outfielders in a pick-up game play deep on a landing strip on Ofu Island, used for only two flights a day.

Workers end their shift at a tuna cannery on Tutuila (right). Furnishing more than 30 percent of the U.S. mainland's tuna imports, canneries employ a third of the territory's workforce. The government employs another third.

closes with *sā*, 15 minutes or so of prayer and reflection led by family elders. A bell tolls, and the village hushes until the only sounds are murmured vespers from the open-air houses and the trilling of birds as the last light works its way up toward the crags.

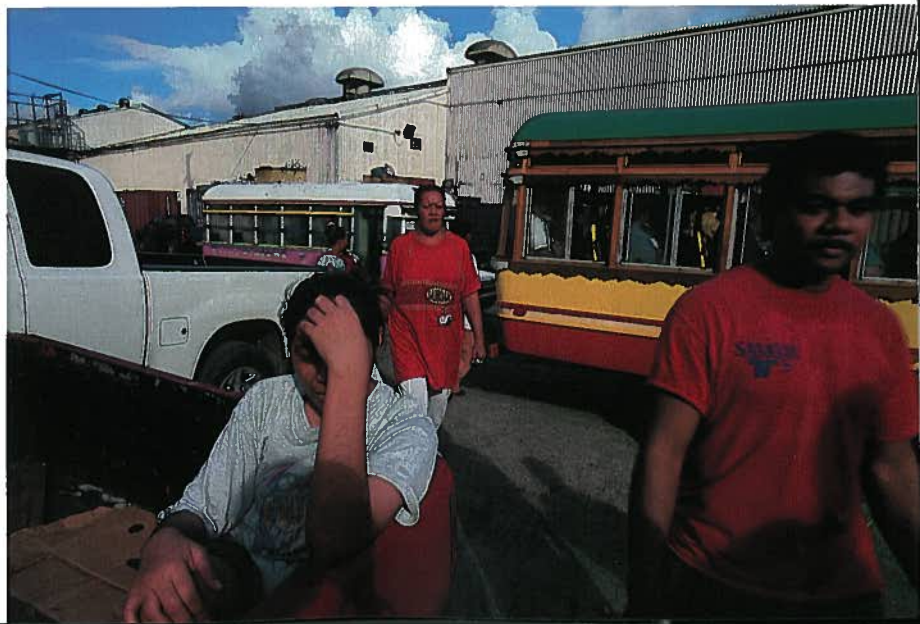
Another aspect of Christianity that islanders take seriously is the admonition to treat others with kindness. It makes an easy fit with long-standing customs of hospitality in a land of plenty. If you pass by looking thirsty, someone is likely to hand you a young, watery coconut. And whether you look hungry or not, strangers invite you home for a meal.

"Everyone is so nice!" is the first sentence out of every visitor's mouth," says park superintendent Chris Stein. "At first outsiders can't quite believe it. They keep expecting to get hustled for something in return." Because the culture is such an integral part of the National Park of American Samoa, visitors are encouraged to stay in villages next to the reserve, either at the modest lodges or in the guest houses most families already maintain for friends and relatives passing through. This gives outsiders a better chance to get to know people like Mafuta, the healer, or her neighbor, Ta'au'au Utuone, who shows me how to make a fish-trap basket from the aerial roots of a rain forest tree and braided coconut fibers. The financial benefits of providing food and lodging go directly to the local communities.

Park officials don't mind that the vacation resort industry has bypassed the territory, because mass tourism could place undue pressure on a limited environment inside the park and overwhelm the low-key atmosphere of the islands as a whole. No need to make Paka o Amerika Samoa into a crowd pleaser.

"I look at the Park Service as a vehicle for keeping as much as we can of Samoan learning and Samoan culture," Congressman Eni Faleomavaega tells me. "I don't want quick development that will kill us." Tauese P. F. Sunia, the governor, adds, "We have a fixed amount of land, yet our population is booming. We have to preserve the resources of this territory, and the park is the best way to do this. Whether anyone comes to visit or not is secondary."

Of course, not everyone is singing in harmony, even in paradise. Sitting in the palm shade along Ofu's coast, Toeaina Faufano Autele, then a representative to the territorial legislature, says: "We don't need someone from outside telling us what to do with our land. People are



beginning to realize that there will be regulations. The park said I can't take rocks for building from my family's part of this beach. Then I hear we can't build a pipeline across the park to deliver water to other families. I told the ranger I don't mind if tourists use my property. They are welcome to visit. That's our tradition. But please remove my land from the park."

Leota, the park's high-talking ranger, sees more opportunities than problems. "Every chief from every village has been in to talk to us," he says. "Most want to join the park. The main reason the reserve isn't getting larger by the year is that we don't want to end up leasing little pieces everywhere. We would rather add to existing units. And before we can do that, Congress has to revise the park boundaries."

THE NATIONAL PARK of American Samoa is the first contractual park in the U.S. system, but the ideas behind it are being tested in a number of places. Indigenous peoples in Alaska and in northern Canada and other countries have been granted subsistence rights within national parks. The Great Basin National Park in Nevada, established in 1986, allows sheep grazing and other economic activities. Though not so widely known, various National Park Service programs merely help fund and coordinate the efforts of state heritage agencies and private civic groups.

Parks are limited only by our inventiveness. I find myself pondering American Samoa's contribution as I hike the sea's edge in Ta'u. Thick-trunked *futu*, or fish poison trees, border the beach with sprays of big, purplish, bat-pollinated flowers. Each flower blooms for a day and a night or two then drops loose. Strewn across the forest floor with their long, tentacle-like stamens waving in the breeze, the fallen blossoms look like sea anemones washed in by a storm tide. Villagers used to gather the fruits and mash them together and cast the mixture into shallow waters to capture fish stunned by the poison.

The woodland path crosses small plantations of taro, coconut, and banana within the park. Then I break out onto a rocky point and am met by mile upon mile of breakers rolling straight in off the Pacific to curl and surge against dark lava and untracked beaches spread below the mountain walls. An hour's walk down the coast—or is it two hours? and why should I care?—I dive from a mossy ledge into the pool below a thousand-foot waterfall, come spouting up into the sunlight, and realize that this is a place I always dreamed of but had almost given up hope of ever finding. As long as this is a park, that kind of hope need never dim. □

Leery of sharks, a spearfisher off Ofu trails a long stringer to keep a prudent distance from his catch. Many residents still fish and farm to sustain themselves, and park officials pledge that the influx of visitors will not upset the balance between Samoans and their natural heritage.





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UP HOPE OF EVER FINDING.

DOUBLE MAP SUPPLEMENT: AUSTRALIA

VOL. 198, NO. 1



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BY SCOTT THYBONY PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL HATCHER

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The Cover

Felled by an earthquake, a stone head on Nemrud Dag in eastern Turkey is part of a 2,000-year-old shrine built by Antiochus I to glorify himself for eternity.
Photograph by Reza

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