

The Pacific: A World Unto Itself

Sprinkled across 30 million square kilometers of the planet's biggest ocean live 8.5 million Pacific islanders, of Micronesian, Melanesian and Polynesian descent.

Despite various limiting factors such as isolation, small land areas and tiny populations, Pacific islanders, have been able to meet their subsistence needs relatively easily. Over the generations, these people have developed traditional ways of living that have also respected and conserved their environment.

More recently, the spread of the western influence, development of commercial markets and capital-driven industry has led to some major changes on land, and sea that are placing unsustainable demands on Pacific resources. Even the most basic need, fresh water, is being depleted by the rise in urban



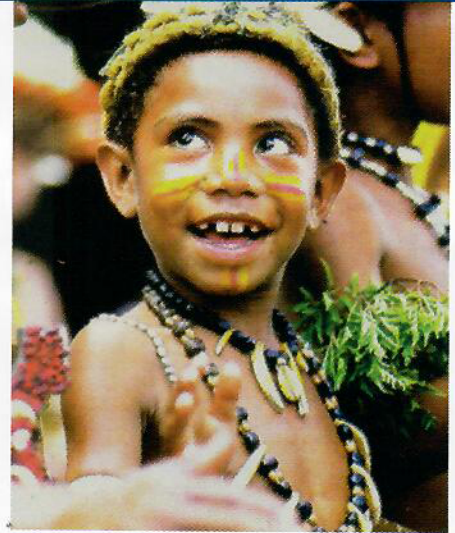
and industrial development. Land degradation, waste, pollution, invasive species and population growth threaten both marine and terrestrial ecology. If left unchecked serious environmental fallout and dire economic consequences await.

Ecotourism is offering some help in turning this situation around for Pacific islanders. The Mexican architect Hector Ceballos Lascurian coined the term in 1983, meaning responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.

When Lascurian visited the Pacific, he was sure that ecotourism could provide our island lifestyles with feasible business ventures and still allow conservation and sustainable development. Over the last ten years the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands and Tonga, have established eco-tourism destinations that feature whale watching, canopy walkways, bird watching, diving and rainforest hideaways.

These ventures are creating much-needed jobs and money for villagers and communities, where previously little opportunity had existed. The most important step now is for the private sector, such as hotel owners and tour operators, to work with village communities to fuse environmental conservation and business vision.

At the same time we must all keep in mind the impacts of any type of tourism.



Regardless of how eco-friendly we try to be, the mere presence of the human element threatens waste accumulation, site degradation, the arrival of invasive species and the disturbance of plant and animal life and the ecosystems they depend on. Many players in the tourism industry do not understand the environment or what is required to sustain it. A better understanding will lead to a better end product and in the long term a healthier bottom line.

There is also a need to ensure effective conservation measures are put in place and enforced by our governments, communities, business operators and visitors. If we all take responsibility, then the rewards are there for all to enjoy on an enduring basis. Welcome to our world.

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