



Tabus or not taboos?

How to use traditional environmental knowledge to support sustainable development of marine resources in Melanesia

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INTRODUCTION

Melanesian communities have long histories of interaction with the natural environment. Their unique traditional knowledge and cultural practices have been developed over many centuries and transmitted from generation to generation. Many Melanesian communities developed management practices to ensure the sustainability of fisheries resources, and these practices were based on detailed biological knowledge of the species involved. Today, traditional marine resource management continues to be practiced by communities and contributes extensively to the conservation of local resources and the spiritual, cultural and economic well-being of villagers. The role of customary owners is recognised within the constitutions of Melanesian countries, some of which give primary recognition to customary law.

Yet this deep-rooted knowledge is now threatened. Many government regulations in Melanesia apply conventional western management concepts and models. By failing to properly take into account customary practices or traditional knowledge, these regulations serve to greatly weaken local authorities. The introduction of new fishing techniques and commercial fishing attitudes have destabilised traditional management and resulted in a reduced respect for traditional chiefs and elders, especially among the youth. Moreover, communities often lack adequate scientific information on which to base management decisions. Thus, there is a need to harmonise traditional and modern practices (as emphasised in government laws). This harmonisation process should incorporate the best practices of traditional marine resource management, with a view to ensuring sustainable development.

These issues were discussed at a workshop on Traditional Knowledge and Coastal Resource Conservation for Countries and States of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, held at IMPAC (International Marine Project Activities Centre) in Townsville, Australia, in March/April 2004. The workshop sought to determine the underlying principles and themes that could be used to enhance the use and recognition of traditional knowledge and laws, with a goal of improving biodiversity conservation and management of coastal resources. The case studies from the workshop explore the links between customary laws — especially those relating to fisheries management — and existing government regulations, with a view to ensuring that government regulations take full account of customary practices. Melanesian case studies are complemented with case studies from other regions, which provide useful examples.

The case studies demonstrate where traditional and customary management practices have been recognised within national laws, and suggest how appropriate aspects of traditional practices can be drafted into policy and law within the different tiers of government (local; provincial or state; national or federal; and international within multi-lateral environment agreements - MEAs). The case studies provide examples of how better cooperation could be established between traditional and “modern” management practices, thus ensuring optimal use of marine resources in other coastal regions of the world.

The first eight case studies (Section 1) from Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia focus on incorporating traditional knowledge into government laws. These case studies provide examples of synergy between customary and government

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law, revealing successes as well as limits of the varied initiatives.

Section 2 case studies focus on community involvement in the management of marine resources. They show the need for co-management and the empowerment of communities, notably through decentralisation processes. Co-management can prove to be a success, as in Fiji, but intersectoral problems can have a negative

effect on cooperation, as shown in the second case study from Papua New Guinea.

The solution may rest in the establishment of an international regime protecting traditional knowledge, which is the focus of Section 3. The last case study explores the issue of access and benefit sharing, and intellectual property rights, through the example of the Australian Institute of Marine Science.

SECTION I: INCORPORATING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE INTO GOVERNMENT LAW

Case Study I

Merging traditional resource management approaches and practices with the formal legal system in Vanuatu

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Traditional laws and conservation practices

Vanuatu is a multicultural nation, where more than 100 languages are in use in 80 different islands. Although it is threatened, traditional culture remains active and traditions and practices continue to be passed orally from generation to generation.

Pre-western contact

A wide range of traditional conservation approaches and practices existed in Vanuatu in the past. Two general types of resource management systems were in place: direct management and indirect management. Direct management occurred as a result of direct observations (and a perception of a change in resource status, or degradation of ecosystems), which led to decisions to take relevant, corrective action (e.g. declaring a ban — taboo or tabu). Indirect management had a more spiritual and cultural basis, and conservation measures were established via ritual and initiation ceremonies. Indirect resource management practices included the establishment of taboo sites, and taboos imposed by customs following particular events such as an epidemic, a murder, or a pig killing ceremony. Direct practices included periodic taboos imposed by chiefs or landowners, and symbolised by recognised markers.

What remains today?

Although traditional resource management practices continue to be used in Vanuatu, they are

threatened by development. Taboo sites and periodic taboos continue to be important, although concerns are continually raised regarding the decline in respect for taboo sites. Customary taboos have also declined due to the acceptance of Christianity and European mores. Differences in perceptions between traditional and western cultures about resources have led to considerable disagreement and confusion about marine management. However, the key underlying values of traditional resource management contain some elements of the western principle of “sustainable development”. These values (livelihood, equity, responsibility and cooperation) are anchored by the four main pillars of society’s existence: security of tenure; inheritance and use rights; site based focus and affinity with the land; and decision-making processes and decision-makers. However, these traditional values have been challenged by a lack of clear resource management and development policy directions at the national level, western education, the *wantok* system (especially rural-urban), and colonialism.

Interface between traditional and governmental laws: Issues and challenges

Traditional knowledge and practices can be useful in two key areas: education, and the design and implementation of an appropriate sustainable community resource management model.

Education in Vanuatu has suffered because the educational system, which was based on a western

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