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Sustainability: Suspicions concerning attainability, with particular reference to the pacific

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Publication Details

Wolfers, E. (2017). Sustainability: Suspicions concerning attainability, with particular reference to the pacific. *Portal: journal of multidisciplinary international studies*, 14 (2), 87-101.

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UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 14, No. 2
September 2017

Communities Acting for
Sustainability in the Pacific
Special Issue, guest edited by
Anu Bissoonauth and Rowena
Ward.



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Citation: Wolfers, E. P. 2017. Sustainability: Suspicions Concerning Attainability, with Particular Reference to the Pacific. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 14:2, 87-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v14i2.5484>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published
by UTS ePRESS | <http://portal.ePRESS.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainability: Suspicions Concerning Attainability, with Particular Reference to the Pacific

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v14i2.5484>

Article History: Received 11/04/2017; Revised 18/06/2017; Accepted 07/07/2017; Published 05/10/2017

Abstract

Sustainability and unsustainability are frequently deployed in discussions of intended, predicted and observed changes occurring in or impacting on Pacific islands societies. Local communities often have their own distinctive understanding of the natural environment. Their concern for sustainability frequently extends further afield – to languages, cultures, and other aspects of life. International agreements and the constitutions of a number of Pacific islands countries address relevant issues. Constitutional government in the region has been remarkably sustained. Sustainable development has diverse dimensions and can be controversial. Climate change and rising sea-levels threaten the very survival of low-lying islands. Harvesting of non-renewable resources raises particular issues. Pacific islands studies have made significant contributions to scientific knowledge and human understanding of issues and processes of wider, even global importance.

Keywords

Sustainability; environment; sustainable development; constitutions; Pacific studies

Introduction

Sustainability has become something of a catchword, not only in the Pacific, but globally, used to justify or legitimate a wide range of different activities, and to criticize or condemn others.¹ Key aspects of sustainability include continuity and support. A sustainable activity is one that can continue indefinitely or until its completion—and, in the case of an activity with wider possible impacts, without causing unnecessary disruption to other activities, society or the environment. A sustainable physical project can be expected to continue or operate if it is properly maintained. Both the word and the idea of sustainability—and its opposite, unsustainability—are widely used in debates over intended, predicted or observed changes occurring in or impacting on Pacific island societies. Although there are questions about their scope and effectiveness, a growing number of regional and other international agreements have sustainability as a stated objective. The words ‘sustain’ or ‘sustainable’ appear in only three constitutions of the twenty Pacific states and non-self-governing Pacific territories on the leading website through which the region’s laws can be accessed, the Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute: Pitcairn Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Fiji. However, the diverse environmental, cultural, economic and societal processes to which these terms have been attached appear in the constitutions of another eleven states and territories: Northern Mariana Islands, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Questions of sustainability are relevant to almost every academic discipline embraced by Pacific studies. In the case of Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, a 2010 report by a New Zealand parliamentary committee raised important questions—and made interesting recommendations—in regard to the (un-)sustainability and the case for reform of existing arrangements in the New Zealand Realm (New Zealand House of Representatives 2010). For people living on low-lying coral atolls or other islands in the Pacific, the threat that climate change poses to their very survival (unless they leave) as sea-levels rise means that questions of (un)sustainability are more than a matter of words or reform of existing arrangements. It is accordingly important to clarify what sustainability and unsustainability purport to mean, both in principle and in practice, and to assess their particular pertinence to the Pacific islands.

The following discussion addresses, in turn, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, specific aspects and examples of sustainability in the Pacific, as well as issues and possible strategies of particular relevance to ensuring the sustainability of Pacific studies. The diverse topics to which sustainability may be relevant—together with the variety of contexts in which sustainability is an attribute or an issue—mean that this paper draws on a variety of examples, countries and territories in the region, and academic disciplines in exploring and trying to explain what might be at stake in discussions of sustainability in the Pacific.

Sustainability and the natural environment

Questions of sustainability are not novel in the Pacific. As the late Ron Crocombe observed, the portrayal of early human settlers in the Pacific ‘as natural ecologists, caring for the ecosystem, is exaggerated. Like all humans, they learned to conserve and enhance the environment only after over-exploitation caused problems’ (Crocombe 2008: 5). Examples Crocombe cited include the extinction of many species of birds in New Zealand, the

¹ This article draws on a Keynote Address to the Australian Association of Pacific Studies’ Conference on ‘Sustainability,’ held at the University of Wollongong, 12–14 April 2012.

degradation of forests on Wallis and Futuna and other islands, the deforestation of Easter Island, and the disappearance of various bird species elsewhere.

However, as Crocombe also acknowledged, there have been significant instances of human behaviour in the Pacific that displayed close understanding of the environment and the need to behave in ways that minimize negative impacts, whether for self-interested or other reasons. Leaving agricultural land fallow between harvests is a case in point (2008: 6). Other examples include ‘traditional’—pre-colonial—agricultural systems described by Brookfield with Hart (1971: 88), ‘in which the landscape is transformed,’ but not completely destroyed:

by elaborate techniques of water control—both irrigation and drainage—by terracing, ridging and mounding, slope control and various methods for the control of fallow cover. In this class of systems, the cultivation landscape is quite different ecologically from the pre-existing landscape, and never returns to it while in occupation of man. (Brookfield with Hart 1971: 88)

In yet other places, another author, Edvard Hviding, has described religiously motivated observances and taboos as ‘designed to maximize long-term yields of fishing grounds, garden lands and hunting areas’ (2003: 256). These practices were often based on local observations and experience.

In this regard, it may be relevant to observe that Pacific islands societies have not regarded themselves as distant or separate from the natural environment in the way that modern scholarly science seems to do. As Hviding has observed—and other scholars have shown—Pacific islands societies have their own scientific understandings of the environment in which they live, cultivate food-crops, hunt, and, as the case may be, fish. These understandings are based on first-hand experience, observations and customary beliefs (2003: 250). Or, as the scholar and writer the late Epeli Hau’ofa (2008) put it, people in the Pacific (not including those living in the interiors of larger islands) have their own understandings of the places they inhabit, and do not see themselves as living and working on islands separated by expanses of sea, but, rather, in ‘a sea of islands.’ Despite the rhetoric of remoteness and isolation often invoked by outsiders, people living far inland are connected in various ways—through trade, ceremonial exchange, intermarriage, and conflict—with their immediate neighbours, and eventually with people on the coast (as the prevalence of shells used for purposes of exchange and personal adornment in the Papua New Guinea Highlands suggests). It is, therefore, appropriate to recognize that sustainability is not simply a matter for the environment ‘out there.’ It is so intimately connected with people’s daily lives that a strong case can be made that the distinction between community and environment does not apply, at least not when it comes to people raised and living in the same or (in the case of some married people who have moved to their spouse’s home village or island) similar places to those where ancestral generations lived before.

A related point is that Pacific Islanders often understand their natural environment in rather different ways to outsiders. Communities whose ancestors lived alongside a river for some thousands of years might not regard a change in the colour of the water as inconsequential, even if scientists assure them that it has no significance. The same can apply if birds in an area cease singing, insects stop croaking, marine life disappears from local rivers, and plants (even plants that are not used for fuel, food or decoration) begin to die. For people who eat plants, birds, insects, or locally available species of marine life—or consume creatures that do so themselves—assurances to the contrary made by highly qualified and dispassionate scientists may also ring hollow. Moreover, these observations are not merely academic. For

example, in Bougainville, attempts by well-qualified foreign scientists to reassure local villagers that changes in their environment did not give rise to concern for the health or wellbeing of people in the area around the Panguna mine led to a walkout by Francis Ona in the lead-up to what became a conflict that engulfed Bougainville for almost nine years. The conflict eventually cost an estimated 15–20,000 lives, many injuries, and widespread suffering, as well as the destruction of a great deal of public and private property in Bougainville (Independent State of Papua New Guinea 1991).

Sustainability, tradition and change

Sustainability is not necessarily or primarily a matter of concern for the natural environment. Pacific Islanders have considerable experience of other efforts to ensure sustainability—learning how to behave and what to believe from their parents and other community elders; learning from and participating in efforts by Christian missionaries to change their beliefs and ways of life; obeying the instructions of colonial field officers; and, recently, listening to the advice of foreign consultants to government, non-government organizations, and national leaders and officials. As these examples suggest, sustainability has frequently not been a matter of preserving tradition. In the case of missionaries, colonial officers and other actors, the objective has often been the modification or abandonment of previous beliefs and practices, and sustainable—and sustained—change. The same has been true when it came to education and training, public service localization programs, and other activities, such as political education and a phased transfer of power, intended to ‘prepare’ Pacific islands people for self-government and independence (where the sustainability of national government and other values, such as democracy and the rule of law, have frequently been the colonial governments’ specific objectives). Similar concerns to ensure the sustainability of particular values and institutions in post-colonial societies can be seen in the efforts by foreign aid donors as well as regional and other international organizations to engage in capacity-building, institutional strengthening, and, recently, efforts to promote representation of women in national parliaments. Other efforts (with sometimes debatable effects) include the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs, aid donors’ support for the construction and upgrading of infrastructure, and the provision of academic scholarships and exchanges. As the foregoing outline suggests, sustainability has been an important consideration in a range of activities. However, a particular difficulty arises: what does ‘sustainable development’ signify?

Sustainable development

‘Sustainable development’ was a key recommendation made—and, in certain respects, made famous—by the ambitiously named World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations and chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland (which has become widely known as the Brundtland Commission). The objective was recommended in a report entitled ‘Our Common Future’ (United Nations 1987). According to this Report, ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (54). It recognizes that ‘Living standards that go beyond the basic minimum are sustainable only if consumption standards everywhere have regard for long-term sustainability’ (84–85). In short, we live in an interconnected and mutually dependent world, a technologically more advanced and geographically wider version of the ‘sea of islands’ in which Hau’ofa (2008) argued that Pacific Islanders have always lived.

But, even so, what are basic needs? Food, shelter and clothing are frequently cited, as well as opportunities to earn an income, particularly in urban settings. However, anyone familiar with the effects of urbanization and changing lifestyles in rural villages knows that families from communities that have previously grown, hunted or fished for food often no longer do so (or not as frequently). They have become dependent on tinned meat or fish and rice. The question is whether these are 'basic needs,' particularly in rural areas, in the same way that these and other foods can be for people in other long-urbanized parts of the world whose families have been living for generations in slums with no village or land rights to which to return elsewhere. Moreover, is the need for shelter not affected by climate or the educational needs of children? Or, do women from countries where their predecessors moved around freely bare-breasted need clothes? Many development advocates feel that they do. But warmth is often not their principal concern: it is a sense of modesty inculcated by churches, education, and exposure to mass media. Additionally, what clothing do men need, particularly young men who are aware from television of the stylishness of certain t-shirts and jeans? It is all very well to declare that following the latest American or European fashions is not necessary, but what if young people disagree and steal clothes or money to buy clothes in order to meet a felt need? Might it not be reasonable to conclude that aspirations—and feelings of relative deprivation, hence perceived needs—can change over time? Such questions are important, complex, and, for many people, sensitive enough to warrant careful consideration.

As sustainable development is more widely discussed and even accepted as an important objective and principle of public policy, so its application has become more diverse—and sometimes controversial. The very idea of 'sustainable mining' is, in certain respects, an extreme. What can it possibly mean? How can a non-renewable resource be mined in a way that ensures that all relevant factors and processes will continue?

Sustainability and non-renewable resources

According to an Australian Government publication (2016), issued by the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science following consultation with Australian mining industry and other interest groups: 'In the minerals sector, sustainable development means that investments in minerals projects should be financially profitable, technically appropriate, environmentally sound and socially responsible.' For its part, the former Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID), which, together with its website has not been sustained (hence the absence of an online address for the following quote), described the concept of a sustainable mining sector as involving 'Making better use of revenues, improving socially and environmentally sustainable development, and growing the economy.' In similar vein, the Papua New Guinea Sustainable Development Program Limited, which was set up to manage the equity of the former mine operator in the Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea's Western Province, has distinguished between mining itself and the socio-economic benefits to which it can lead, both while a mine continues to operate and following mine closure. One reaction to the AUSAID publication by a young Papua New Guinean blogger, a former student turned betel-nut seller, has been a passionate accusation headed 'AUSAID's neo-colonisation agenda extends to "SUSTAINABLE MINING,"' which he describes as 'this Aussie CRAP!' (Namorong 2012).

In the 1987 report 'Our Common Future,' the World Commission on Environment and Development recognized that the use of non-renewable resources

reduces the stock available for future generations. But this does not mean that such resources should not be used. In general the rate of depletion should take into account the criticality of that resource, the availability of technologies for minimizing depletion, and the likelihood of substitutes being available ... Sustainable development requires that the rate of depletion of non-renewable resources should foreclose as few future options as possible. (United Nations 1987: 54)

The report goes on to say: 'In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations' (United Nations 1987: 55). So back to continuity and support, and the uncertain issues involved in trying to define, let alone to meet, human needs and aspirations.

Defining 'sustainability' and 'development'

In certain respects, the entire discussion of sustainable development harks back to a set of issues that arose in previous discussions of development. Whereas an early theorist on the subject, W. W. Rostow (1960), tried to define stages of development without predicting what might follow stage five, the age of high mass consumption, others have argued that there are limits to growth—hence to sustainable development defined primarily in economic terms.

Some of the difficulties in defining sustainable development stand out, still unresolved. At one extreme there are sceptics, such as the British writer Jenkins, who argued that '[t]he word sustainable should never appear in an Act of Parliament. It is a weasel word, an adjective not qualifying a noun, but lightly dusting it with vague political approval' (2011: 3). However, having condemned the adjective, Jenkins then argues that 'sustainability' is the sort of term that 'gave us downsizing for sacking, and humanitarian intervention for war. The only sustainable meadow is a meadow. Sustainable development is a contradiction in terms. It means development' (2011: 3). Whether there is or can be a process of sustainable development is clearly contentious.

Another difficulty arises from the diverse, often imprecise ways in which 'development' is defined. If it is a specific step forward, then sustainability is a matter of ensuring that a particular development is maintained—with, perhaps, some requirement of ongoing support. If, however, development is regarded as an ongoing, open-ended process, then the question arises whether 'sustainable development' is not just a matter of sustaining a particular step (or development) but an ongoing, perhaps open-ended process in which development itself continues to move ahead. In countries where the population is rapidly increasing, as in most of the Pacific, this probably means that the development process must not only embrace more people but keep compounding incrementally so that poverty, new diseases, and other disadvantages are overcome, and more and more nutritious food, improved public health and access to education become more readily available—eventually, perhaps, beyond the targets and benchmarks set for the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequently updated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Here it is worth noting that only two Pacific island countries, Cook Islands and Niue, both of which enjoy the benefits that come with being in free association with New Zealand, achieved all of the MDGs, while the independent states of Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands achieved none (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2015: 8).

There is clearly a need to clarify terms not only for the sake of academic analysis and debate but so that proponents of sustainability in its diverse manifestations do not mislead or confuse where they purport to inspire, explain, or, preferably, undertake positive action. In this respect, students and practitioners in the field of Pacific studies, particularly those committed to their advancement, have a scholarly responsibility and, arguably, a wider public role to play in clarifying both what has been achieved in the region, and the challenges lying ahead.

Sustainability in the Pacific: national constitutions

Constitutions are, almost by definition, intended by those who make, implement or simply respect them to be sustainable—to guide and regulate significant aspects of governance, government and law—with public policy-making and implementation in accordance with relevant constitutional provisions to proceed indefinitely, subject only to amendment made in accordance with specified procedures. As previously noted, most Pacific islands countries' constitutions make specific reference to some aspects of sustainability and sustainable development. These include commitments to environmental conservation. No doubt because of their previous exposure to United States' (US) nuclear-testing and the ongoing US military presence in the region, the constitutions of countries and territories previously part of the former Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, including the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the three states now in free association with the USA (the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau) contain specific provisions regarding any agreements to test, store or dispose of nuclear or other toxic substances within their jurisdictions. The constitutions of Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands and Vanuatu refer explicitly (in language familiar to readers of key texts on sustainable development) to the obligations that people living now owe to the interests of 'future generations.' The constitution of Nauru, a country that has arguably experienced more widespread and enduring degradation of its environment than any other country in the region (though parts of other countries are in similar situations), contains two rather unusual provisions. One requires the establishment of a Long Term Investment Fund, while the other exempts the Nauru government from responsibility for rehabilitating land from which phosphate was mined until shortly before independence. The first provision appears to be directed towards enhancing Nauru's economic sustainability; the second seems designed to ensure that certain legal responsibilities cannot be sustained.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (United Nations 1982) provides what might be regarded as a framework for various declarations, agreements and practical efforts—through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency and other regional organizations—to promote sustainable use of the region's rich fisheries, particularly tuna. Other international conventions concern endangered species, and the conservation of significant aspects of humanity's heritage, including the natural environment. In the Pacific, these are (intended to be) supported by the Pacific Education for Sustainable Development Framework. However, Crocombe (2008: 514) has acerbically commented, in regard to the 1995 Suva Declaration on Sustainable Human Development, that the costs involved in negotiating some of these agreements and then in holding follow-up meetings may well outweigh the benefits. His conclusion was that '[w]hen people see that governance as *practised* by international agencies (quite distinct from governance as *preached* and *defined* by them) consists of platitudes, rituals and ripoffs, that is what they learn' (2008: 514). The implications for relevant aspects of Pacific studies seem clear: there is a need to look beyond what governments and international organizations say about sustainability and sustainable

development and to examine what they actually do. The result for fisheries, in particular, while open to improvement, is arguably not as grim as it appears to be in relation to other activities, such as forestry.

In regard to forestry, it can be difficult for a lay person to arrive at an accurate and definite assessment. Different analysts reach quite different, even contradictory, conclusions as to the rate of tree-felling that should be regarded as sustainable. While some, for example, write passionately about unsustainable logging in Papua New Guinea, others compare what is happening there with tree-felling rates in Europe and even argue that there is room for increase; however, it is revealing when one sees how work on some timber projects suddenly falls silent when unknown visitors unexpectedly appear. Moreover, experience suggests that rural communities are not necessarily opposed to having their land cleared of trees—perhaps for the income to be gained immediately, and even because of their hope that the land can then be put to different use. The way in which many Papua New Guinean communities have agreed to having their land cleared—in some observers' views, unsustainably—under Special Agricultural Business Leases (SABLs) is a case in point. The issue for many rural landowners may well be to take what they can get now, instead of waiting for the results likely to be gained from insisting on forms and rates of harvesting that are more likely to be sustainable in the medium- or long-term. However, according to the Report on the Commission of Inquiry into SABLs (Commission of Inquiry 2013: 9), the result has been a 'drastic' reduction in customary landownership: '[t]his present a huge problem in a country such as PNG where bulk of its population live in rural areas and are subsistence farmers living on their land for sustenance and survival' (2013: 9). With population growth estimated at 7.5 percent, 'customary land [has now] become scarce giving rise to land disputes and other social and law and order problems' (2013: 9).

An unusual form of sustainability, which has not attracted a great deal of academic (or other) attention, concerns the ways in which constitutional government in the Pacific has generally been maintained or (as in the case of Tonga and Samoa, in particular) continued to evolve towards democracy. Having experienced four military coups, Fiji is an obvious exception, as is Solomon Islands, which experienced a coup by armed insurgents in 2000. However, what is remarkable to students of decolonization, constitutions and democracy in other parts of the world is the sustainability that has prevailed in most of the region subsequent to formal decolonization. Clearly, the legitimacy of existing arrangements and a willingness to change them in accordance with their own procedures is key.

In the case of Papua New Guinea, many observers predicted that the constitution adopted at independence would be disrupted by a military coup, an illegal seizure of power by a political party or faction, and/or widespread demands for secession. There have been a number of events which might be described as near-misses: the Rooney affair in 1979 and 1980; the Sandline affair in 1997; and the two competing claimants to the prime ministership in 2011–2012. However, to date, the way in which the independence constitution was made, and legitimated, on the basis of widespread consultation through public meetings and political discussion groups scattered throughout the country has acted to prevent such a situation arising (Papua New Guinea Constitutional Planning Committee 1974). Thus Papua New Guinea may be used as a control in comparative studies of military behaviour, particularly in newly independent countries. However, the Bougainville conflict between 1989 and 1997 provides a significant qualification to generalizations about Papua New Guinea as a whole.

The idea of a 'home-grown' constitution for an independent Papua New Guinea owed quite a deal to the Samoan precedent (Davidson 1967: 349–411), which was a marked

departure from the customary practice of formal decolonization in which the constitution of the successor state was either negotiated over the table with officials of the departing colonial power or simply imposed (Roberts-Wray 1966: 298–301). Generational change might help to explain the current situation in Papua New Guinea, where a small minority of current national leaders was involved in the making of the national constitution and has developed a consequential sense of ownership and commitment. The rise in numbers of politicians from parts of the country where custom appears to retain greater influence than colonial rule is an example of how the sustainability of some influences may prevail over others, at least, for a time.

Other challenges

When it comes to government services and the economy, the reality in many parts of the Pacific has been that rapidly rising populations and the unwillingness of foreign aid donors to provide direct support for recurrent expenditures means that governments in the region find it difficult to meet the needs, let alone to provide opportunities for sustainable development, for their people. The resulting shortfalls in the provision of government services—often due to the absence or lack of adequately maintained infrastructure—mean that access to health, education and other services fall short of demand. While elites may travel abroad for medical treatment or send their children overseas for education, less fortunate fellow-citizens often miss out. Sustainability, let alone sustainable development, involves ever greater challenges, such as securing support for sustaining previous developments, which—despite the rhetoric of partnership—foreign aid donors may be reluctant to provide (though neglect by recipients and subsequent ‘upgrading’ by foreign aid donors may achieve similar results).

Meanwhile, much of the potential for development in Papua New Guinea, in particular, seems to depend on revenues and employment opportunities to be gained from the extraction of non-renewable resources—with all of the challenges that such development poses for environmental and employment sustainability, even if substantial revenues are invested in, say, a sovereign wealth fund.

The small, but significant, departure of graduates and other skilled personnel overseas poses a growing challenge, even as migration and the expectation of remittances becomes an increasingly significant aspect of some governments’ development strategies. Moreover, many skilled personnel cannot be readily replaced should they leave. Examples include doctors and nurses with particular experience of tropical diseases that their counterparts in other countries are frequently not as well-trained to identify or treat. The obverse involves architects and engineers who, lacking experience in geologically unstable environments, have come from abroad to design buildings, including a significant number in Port Moresby, which cannot be sustained. Here, perhaps, is an argument for promoting continuity and support for personnel already in-country for the sake of diverse forms of sustainability.

As previously observed, the most dramatic, proximate threat to the very survival of some Pacific islands countries—and to parts of others—appears to be rising sea-levels occasioned by global warming. This is additional to the environmental stress previously visible on coral atolls, in particular, as a result of the availability and use of new kinds of metal tools, changing agricultural practices, and increasing populations. A noteworthy feature of these threats to the sustainability of entire countries, individual islands and many communities is the failure of the international community to find a way to describe the victims, let alone to provide for their future. They are not ‘refugees’ with ‘a well-founded fear of persecution’ on any of the

grounds mentioned in the United Nations Refugee Convention; nor are they likely to qualify as ‘internally displaced persons’ of a conventional kind, and not at all in countries comprised almost entirely of low-lying atolls.

In Kiribati, as in other low-lying island states, rising sea-levels threaten the future habitability of the entire country. Former President Anote Tong has been vocal in calling on the international community to act. He oversaw purchase of 6,500 acres of land in Fiji for the possible future resettlement of people from Kiribati, and expressed the view that young people from Kiribati should be educated for life abroad (‘Politics in Kiribati’ 2016). However, the international community has given little or no consideration—at least publicly—to the question whether entire nations or significant communities within them should be enabled to emigrate together, and, if they do, what might be done to preserve their cultures and languages, let alone their political identities. There are, of course, precedents for the displacement and resettlement of populations both within and across political boundaries in the region, including colonial resettlement programs (Connell 2012). However, certain issues are not being addressed, including the possibility, experienced in the case of pre-independence Nauru, that communities offered resettlement might prefer not to go.

On a related point, when the case for sustainability is made, it might be pertinent for there to be a debate on the pros and cons of particular issues. For example, a frequently made observation is that Melanesia is the most linguistically diverse part of the world. Much is made by some participants and commentators of the need to sustain existing languages and cultures. However, as increasing numbers of people marry partners from distant language and ethnic groups, their children frequently do not identify with a particular community. Thus, numbers of young Papua New Guineans, when asked where they are from, give answers such as ‘Kavieng and Lae,’ ‘Simbu and Central,’ or other non-traditional combinations, which frequently draw on identities created during colonial rule or since independence. Meanwhile, *lingue franche* such as *Tok Pisin* continue not only to spread and adopt new terms but to creolize and become the first languages of increasing numbers of people (the same is true, to a lesser extent, for English).

Linguists often stress the importance of maintaining existing languages and not allowing them to die out. However, parents ambitious for the future employment or business prospects of their children may well disagree (as parents have done even in some of the largest linguistic communities in Papua New Guinea, including Enga, where the prospects for actually educating children in the vernacular seem likely to be much better than elsewhere because of the enhanced ability to recruit and train teachers from the area and to publish relevant texts economically). Thus may sustainability be more strongly contested by prospective beneficiaries with different ambitions for their children, in particular, than advocates of sustainability might otherwise have anticipated.

Sustainability and Pacific studies

A book published by the World Wildlife Fund (2012), *Global 200*, which purports to identify 200 places around the world ‘that must survive,’ includes only one in the Pacific: the moist forests of New Caledonia. Students of Pacific studies would, almost certainly, not have much difficulty in identifying many more in the region—from spectacular volcanoes shooting flames and smoke into the air through coral reefs inhabited by many different varieties of fish (including species that scientists have not identified, named, and studied) to seemingly untouched mountains, valleys and beaches that are home to diverse zoological and botanical

species that are still to be identified. The case of a particular species of bird springs to mind: when a television show that was relayed in Papua New Guinea reported the exciting news that a foreign researcher had discovered a poisonous bird, known as the pitohui, in the mountains behind Port Moresby, local residents reacted with the advice—conveyed to a biologist at the University of Papua New Guinea—that they knew of several similar such species.

It is, in part, the discrepancy between local knowledge and mainstream science that enables scientists to produce public estimates of the number of species of fish, plants and other biological phenomena still to be identified and named in Papua New Guinea. Local knowledge can be quite critical when it comes to the ‘discovery’ of previously unstudied rodents, reptiles, and even birds and mammals. And much the same seems to be true when it comes to the number of languages and dialects spoken by the country’s Indigenous inhabitants: local knowledge can often be the key to identifying ‘new’ species.

In this regard, it is pertinent to recall the insightful observation made by the distinguished anthropologist and author, Epeli Hau’ofa (2008: 28), concerning the ‘often derogatory and belittling’ ways in which outsiders have described and interacted with Pacific peoples. Cases in point include the many books that characterise entire societies in terms of a particular characteristic or set of characteristics, often set well in the past, such as ‘primitive,’ ‘savage’ and ‘cannibal.’ They make it difficult to refer young Pacific Islanders to what are often the only available sources of published information about the anthropology and/or history of the societies into which they were born. The point is not just a matter of ‘political correctness’ or mere words. It frequently goes to the heart of what is being explained and, more importantly, what is understood. This is, or ought to be, a matter of concern to students of the Pacific who seek to promote mutual understanding, and respect both among the diverse peoples of the region and with people from other countries.

Pacific islands societies are not dominated by gaps in knowledge, misunderstandings and failures (though they may occur). The region’s societies encompass values, knowledge and behaviours of their own, as worthy of careful study and as likely to yield results of wider significance as other parts of the world. Political and other forms of behaviour in the Pacific are sometimes unique, and accordingly useful to highlight features of other societies that might otherwise be taken for granted. The role of kinship in shaping identity and social obligations, for example, can provide a useful way of highlighting and examining the growing individualism of people in advanced industrial societies. Others actually resemble behaviours that have occurred elsewhere. For example, the conduct of parliamentarians and the character of political parties in Papua New Guinea—and elsewhere in the region—bear a certain resemblance to their counterparts in nineteenth century Great Britain, the Australian states, and the early years of Australian federation (compare, for example, Loveday & Wolfers 1976, and Loveday, Martin & Parker 1977).

Many claims and justifications for Pacific studies as a significant area for academic teaching and research emphasize the region’s proximity and importance to Australia even though remarkably few Australians seem to regard Australia as being in—and so part of—the Pacific region. While understanding neighbouring and nearby countries has merits of its own, there are other ways of justifying and promoting Pacific studies. They include the contributions that studies of the region can make both to knowledge and to understanding of humanity and the world more generally. Obvious instances of the region’s contribution to global knowledge and understanding include the contributions that travel through and studies of the region have made to geography and the study of evolution. Indeed, an entire academic discipline (which, unfortunately, seems to be in decline, at least in Australia) owes much of its main

methodology—fieldwork—and its contributions to social scientific understanding more generally, to work in and about the Pacific: anthropology, in which Bronislaw Malinowski's research in the Trobriand Islands played a pioneering role (1922). The idea that colonized people should be regarded and studied as active participants in making their own history can be found in the research and publications of the late Professor J. W. Davidson and other historians of the Pacific long before post-colonialism became an academic discipline. By encouraging, supporting and assisting Pacific Islanders to write their own stories and creative works, the late Ulli Beier and Ron Crocombe worked to ensure that what postcolonial theorists have described as the voices of subalterns can be heard (or, at least, read).

Research and writing about Papua New Guinea, in particular, have earned a number of important international academic and literary prizes (Wolfers 2005; Winduo 2005). They include the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, won by D. Carleton Gajdusek, for research on kuru, which eventually, provided useful insights into an outbreak in Europe of Creutzfeld-Jakob or Mad Cow Disease. Other examples include the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction, which was won by Jared Diamond's book, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997). Reports of work in or closely relevant to Papua New Guinea have been recognized in the awards made to winners of the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Medal, which was originally given for 'anthropological work in the field,' as well as five gold-medallists of the Royal Geographical Society.

In the literary field, Australian poet and essayist, J. P. McAuley, who served with the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) in World War II and then helped train post-war patrol officers in Australia before they left for the field, wrote both poems and essays about Papua New Guinea, as have such best-selling writers as (Ralph) Hammond Innes (author of a novel about Bougainville), *Solomons Seal* (1980). Other best-selling books about the wider Pacific include James A. Michener's Pulitzer Prize winning work of fiction, *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947), and *Return to Paradise* (1951), among others, as well as Paul Theroux, whose books include *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* (1992). Yet other well-known authors, including Robert Graves, former Professor of Poetry at Oxford and author of the historical novel, *The Islands of Unwisdom* (1949), have written about the region without seeing it. More recently, Deborah Carlyon, became the first author of Papua New Guinean descent to win a significant literary competition abroad, the 2001 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Queensland Writer, which was awarded for *Mama Kuma: One Woman, Two Cultures* (2002).

Thus, studying and writing about the Pacific can be rewarding. It need, and should, not be a matter of pursuing the interests and activities of Australians in the region, as in the case of the current—and growing—interest Australians take in the Kokoda Trail. It can also be rewarding in other ways, including some of particular pertinence to sustainability. In regard to governance, for example, particularly strategies for developing a constitution that is likely to acquire the legitimacy required to be respectfully sustained, the Samoan experience of insisting on and developing a constitution based on a country's shared cultural values has been a source of inspiration to other countries in the region, and might well be propagated elsewhere (even in countries affected by the North African and Arab spring, which have inspired some young bloggers in the Pacific). Samoa's legal autochthony is, in certain respects, a text-book model. People promoting or engaged in peace-making and peace-building in countries outside the region have already sought to draw on the Bougainville experience. Interrogating societies in the region can yield fresh insights into needs, circumstances and possible ways forward in other societies, including Australia and countries in other parts of the world.

Pacific islands societies have had remarkably little impact on Australian society and culture. Papua New Guinea must be among the few former colonies that have had the least impact on the society and culture, including the arts and culinary tastes, of their colonizing powers—in this case, Australia. However, a book like R. J. May's *Kaikai Aniani: A Guide to Bush Foods, Markets and Culinary Arts of Papua New Guinea* (1984), and similar books on the cuisines of other Pacific islands countries, can introduce outsiders to tasty food and recipes from the region. It is accordingly important that Pacific studies not be confined to a regional framework but used to interrogate, to understand and to enrich the wider world of shared humanity and the global environment.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to suggest that students of the Pacific, particularly researchers, concerned with the sustainability of Pacific studies might also embark on other, more narrowly focused academic battles. Ron Crocombe strongly advocated the principle that scholars, particularly fieldworkers, engaged in studying the Pacific have a reciprocal obligation to those who inform or otherwise facilitate their research to make the results of their work available in the region—and to publish there. The implications for the ways in which publications from the region are ranked in Australia seem clear. The same is true of citation indices, which are less likely to produce impressive results for research and writing in and on the Pacific than work on topics of greater interest to academics in other parts of the world (but not necessarily of greater intellectual distinction).

It is, arguably, a sad commentary on universities in Australia that some of the most active research groups working on the Pacific exist not so much because their universities think they are important but because of the Australian government grants on which they depend. These groups include the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia and Resource Management in the Asia Pacific programs at the Australian National University, and the Centre for Democratic Institutions at the same university. Instead of accepting that they must compete in publishing research, attracting citations and recruiting students—when the number of interested academics and books on the region located in Canberra is so far ahead of other Australian centres—academics interested in the Pacific might reasonably see co-operation and appreciation for the existence of a relatively well-endowed resource centre in the national capital as a more useful approach. The comparatively small numbers and relative youth of many academics working at universities and research institutions in the region might also mean, as Crocombe insisted, that researchers based in other countries might be expected to play a mentoring role and encourage students, researchers, and writers to publish their insights into the region.

In short, while the sustainability of Pacific studies appears to be at stake in Australian universities—particularly, when the numbers of students likely to be attracted and the revenues to be earned from the Pacific are compared with other more populated and wealthier parts of the world—the challenge for students of the Pacific seems clear: it is to engage more actively in advocacy (and, perhaps even protest), for the sake of advancing Pacific studies, not only in Australia but in co-operation with like-minded people and organizations in the region, as well as allies and supporters around the world.

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