

Va tapuia: an environmental vision

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As we come to the end of this millennium we become aware of a time period coming to its conclusion. We in fact find that a hundred years has almost ended. In this journey of 100 years, there have been many developments. In the early part of the century, Samoa discovered many other peoples. Apart from the Germans and other Europeans who appeared at the turn of the last century, the Europeans who were already neighbours by settling in nearby New Zealand, made their entrance.

Towards the middle of the century, Samoans decided to leave home for overseas, mainly New Zealand. This migration increased towards the end of the third quarter of the century, so much so that there is probably now as many as 100,000 Samoans living overseas. Our political development saw the early years of interaction with foreigners and the inevitable road to political independence and the centralisation of authority in central government.

We ventured into international affairs, with membership of major international organisations and development of relations with neighbouring countries and other main players in the international arena.

There was improved communication not only within Samoa but also with the outside world, which included travel and telecommunications.

Our lifestyles underwent changes as we took of overseas influences and tried to adapt them to ours or vice versa. The pull of urban Apia with its attractions saw the development of settlements and increased internal migration and urbanisation.

Various development plans were designed and implemented with the central role of government. The move towards partnership between the public and private sectors in the development of the country came as the new theme. All this and many more has happened within this one hundred years.

Throughout this period there have been many visions of where we want to go, whether it be as a nation or as a sector within the nation. Today in this Forum I will attempt to play a small part in the vision with respect to the environment of our nation.

As a nation we have faced and are facing challenges and understand that there are no miracle solutions. It has become increasingly apparent that our natural resources are deteriorating due to the pressures we are placing on them. As the resources deteriorate other problems arise. For example, our forests are being cleared at a rapid rate for agricultural use and for their timber, with the resulting loss of water quality and supply, and loss of biodiversity.

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While development is necessary to improve the lot of our people, at the same time the environment is not an illimitable resource and so should be safeguarded in order to continue to provide for present as well as future generations.

We have already embarked on the development of policies to assist us in this area. The National Environment Management Strategies Task Team is to be commended for the framework they produced for the preparation of detailed policies and educational efforts that will guide the government and the Samoan people towards a more sustainable future. This is a planned and systematic approach to the integration of development and environmental concerns placing the wellbeing of people first and foremost.

It also recognised that people and the environment are interrelated and inseparable, and that a clean and balanced physical environment is vital if we are to achieve a condition of well being that is acceptable and dignified for all citizens.

We need as a priority to concentrate on the critical environment issues that have been identified. These include:

1. The management of population dynamics and trends;
2. Protection of the quality and supply of fresh water;
3. Protection of the sea and marine resources;
4. Management of waste;
5. Combating deforestation;
6. Development of appropriate land use practices;
7. Conservation of biological diversity;
8. Protection of the atmosphere;
9. Planning for climate changes;
10. Preservation of traditional arts, culture and history;
11. Development of human resources and
12. Promoting sustainable economic growth

We need to evaluate what has been done and refocus so that we do not lose track. As part of the process I would advocate revisiting and exploring our own traditional methods as part of our overall strategy. At the heart of the *faamatai* - the Samoan system of social organisation within the Samoan culture - is the fundamental principle of *va tapuia* or norms of behaviour giving rise to other principles such as *va fealoa'i* or mutual respect. *tofa mamao* ma le *faautautaga loloto* or wisdom in the exercise of authority.

Va tapuia is the relationship between brother and sister – the *feagaiga* relationship, the equivalent to a sacred covenant; between the parent especially father/mother and offspring; between male and female, male and male, female and female; between the host and guest; between the dead and the living. There is the *va tapuia* between the person and his/her environment - the land, sea and sky, flora and fauna, then there is the *va tapuia* between the creator and the created.

The *va tapuia* between the person and environment has always been at the core of our existence. Our sense of time is related to the moon and the sun and their relative journeys throughout the day and night. Our food cultivation was determined by the seasons throughout the year taking into account the rain and the sun, wet and dry, and the need for soil replenishment. There was respect for this need so as to maintain the balance.

I am not advocating that we discard everything that we have done to go back to our traditional methods. Rather that we take on board what was there from our ancestors that is relevant in our quest for direction for the future. As one can say:

“Ona o le tofa manino e atoa li’o o le masina, o lea e mafia ai ona liliu le tofa ma aami le moe mamao i faavae e pei o le faamatai ma le feagaiga.”

Samoa philosophy has been likened to the full circle of the moon, describing a philosophical attitude and practice that consists of all aspect of life, holistically:

“Aumaia le va tapuia e fesoasoani i la tatou faigamalaga o le meleniuma fou, e toe poupu a i ma lagolago i lo tatou faamoemoe mo se siosiomaga talafeagai aua le soifua manuia o lo tatou atunuu.”

In conclusion our vision is the sustainable management of Samoa’s environmental resources to ensure a better quality of life for our people.