

## **Knowing your environment – a survey of how Samoans view their environment**

*Maria Talaitupu Kerslake \**

### **Introduction**

This article is based on the results of a survey aimed at measuring the public awareness of Samoans regarding environmental issues. The philosophy behind the survey was adopted from an ardent environmentalist; David Suzuki, who stated – "We are the earth, through the plants and animals that nourish us. We are the rains and the oceans that flow through our veins. We are the breath of the forests of the land and the plants of the sea linked in a web of Community, we are all interconnected."<sup>1</sup>

Most people view the world as composed of separate parts sometimes we compartmentalize the world for the purpose of organizing it, but end up actually separating the different sections in our minds.

People are part of the many systems which in turn form large systems in the environment. This interconnectedness promoted the implementation of this survey research to rediscover the – What, When, Who, Why and Where as well as how Samoans perceive their environment. It was also timely to implement a survey of this nature to measure and ascertain the awareness levels of Samoans themselves regarding their relationship with their natural environment and the issues surrounding it.

In 1992 the environment became an issue of global significance. Yet no study was undertaken of the public's awareness of its major issues. The United Nations General Assembly resolved to set the foundation for its conference on environment and development also known as the Earth Summit in June 1992.

The Earth Summit addressed the concerns of sustainability and the relationship between the environment and economic development. The Governments who were convened there produced a prescription for Planetary survival titled Agenda 21 – so called for its projection that all of its recommendations should be met by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The summit also produced two legally binding conventions on Biodiversity and Climate Change a set of forest principles and the Rio Declaration.

Following Rio, the Agenda 21 called on all governments to participate fully with community organizations in the search for sustainable solutions to the planet's environment and development issues. A new era of partnership was formed between civil society and government in facilitating the implementation of agenda 21. Institutions and local communities were encouraged to participate in taking action needed to ensure a global shift to sustainable living.

This survey was one of our responses to ascertaining the awareness levels of our local community about environmental issues that surrounds them.

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\*M.T. Kerslake is the head of the Department of Sociology & Geography, National University of Samoa

## **Methodology**

A survey of 50 adults was carried out at five locations in Apia. These locations included the Methodist Centre, Chan Mow Supermarket, Post and Telecommunication building, Morris Hedstrom Supermarket and the National Provident Fund Building.

A random selection of people was done, for example, one in every ten adult that walked past the survey area was chosen and interviewed using a questionnaire tool as a guide. Each survey area interviewed 10 respondents. There was no attempt to balance the gender ratio of the respondents. This was deliberate to increase the sample randomness.

The interviewers were students from the National University of Samoa who have had some formal training in interview techniques. The students had an excellent appreciation of environment issues.

## **Results**

The results showed that 21 males and 29 females were selected for interviews. To ensure that nobody was interviewed twice the respondents were asked whether they had been interviewed before that day.

Those that responded Yes – were rejected for further interviews. The detail nature of the questionnaire and the interview meant that people were unlikely to want to be interviewed more than once:

- The respondents consisted of 58% females and in terms of the age spread of the respondents, 50% were 30 years of age or younger. The single largest represented age bracket was the 26-30 year age group with 26% of the respondents.
- About ninety (90%) percent of the respondents did not think the environment was a major concern.
- The younger respondents were more likely to hold this view than the older ones.
- There was no significant difference between the sexes on this view.
- Nearly seventy (70%) percent viewed our environment as either good or very good.

A ratio of 2:1 believed that not only was the environment good but it was also improving. When asked to identify the most important environmental issue to them in that year the respondents nominated depletion of marine resources and waste management as the two most important issues. 60% of the respondents considered that depletion of the marine resources should be the most important environment issue for the government.

An interesting finding was, only four percent (4%) regarded global warming as an important issue for the government. When asked to forecast what important environment issue the government would face in 2007, fifty percent (50%) of the respondents did not offer an opinion. Of those that offered an opinion, the most important issue was global warming 32% followed by depletion of marine resources and deforestation which were both 24% respectively.

When asked whether their behaviour has changed in the five years leading into 1997 and whether this change in behaviour has been beneficial to the environment, about 65% responded in the affirmative. The behaviour change was motivated mainly by personal experience. Most likely the respondents have lived through hurricanes and their devastating effects on the reef and marine life, and the impact of actions like fishermen using dynamites as a method of catching fish.

Over 50% of the respondent, believed that people damage the environment because they either do not understand or are unaware of the impact of their actions. In terms of assisting in providing information to make people aware or better informed respondents nominated radio and television as the two most influential media. In terms of institutions providing environment information. The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme had a higher recognition factor than the Department of Lands, Surveys and Environment.

### **Policy implications**

The study was useful in highlighting some facts about the level of awareness in environmental issues and as such identified some policy implications:

- 1) The government needed to take a more active role in public awareness campaign about environment issues. This is now happening through efforts by the Department of Lands, Surveys and Environment.
- 2) Samoans have tended to be complacent about their environment but are slowly realising their resources are limited. The public awareness and public education campaigns should stress this.
- 3) The change agents should be identified and encouraged again Department of Lands, Surveys and Environment is seen as the main change agent.
- 4) Incentives should be introduced and provided to reward good behaviour.
- 5) Legislations and regulations should be introduced and/or enforced to ensure compliance and to discourage unfriendly behaviour.
- 6) Court action against those selling undersized fish is applauded
- 7) Similar actions may be considered for those dumping rubbish, especially in the rivers, waterways and the sea.
- 8) Highlighting Environmental issues in school curricula in the education system will increase awareness of school children.

This survey points to Samoans having taken sometime to appreciate the most pressing global problems it faces, degradation of the environment. Samoans need to be made to realize that some of their actions may have harmful effects on the environment. The government needs to introduce policies that will change behaviour for the benefit of the environment as further action is needed if Samoa is to contribute effectively to saving the environment for its future generation.

There is an intention to do a follow up study of the same issues in 2007 (ten years later) to measure and compare environmental awareness within Samoa.

### **Reference**

<sup>1</sup>Burns R., Introduction to Research Methods, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Addison Wesley, Longman, Australia Pty Limited, Australia 1997.