

The Green Turtle Tour Project – a successful approach to aiding natural resource management in Samoa

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Summary

Not necessarily all members of the tourism and natural resource sectors will share all the sentiments presented here. Not all members of the tourism industry may realise just how serious the status of our tourism industry really is. What the authors wish for, however, is for you all to make the connection between our natural resources as tourism assets, loss of natural resources equating to loss of our culture, loss of our culture equating to loss of spirituality, loss of our natural resources equating to loss of our tourism sector as possibly our best income-generating option for future generations of Samoans. Samoa may now have one of the world's highest rates of deforestation and an environmental audit of Samoa's forest resources is now being requested. This paper highlights what action needs to be taken. The natural resource owners in Samoa are our Councils of Chief, and the fa'amatai is being questioned for its role in the demise of our natural resources. Laws are broken, sound environmental advice has been ignored, and above points can be seen as constraints to implementing effective natural resource conservation and sustainable tourism in Samoa.

The tourism industry could be justified in calling for a stop to non-sustainable tourism in Samoa until we have learnt to protect our natural resources, learnt to protect our culture and/or learnt how to use tourism as our best environmental management tool. This paper explains how this last statement may be seen as a catalyst provided we learn to do tourism better in Samoa – but this will require a lot of further tourism research in Samoa as well as more holistic planning at a national level with all stakeholders involved. The Government of Samoa, local academic institutions and our Councils of Chiefs need to embrace tourism research and tourism planning and natural resource management immediately, but without the understanding and prioritization needed comes little commitment and insufficient sustainable implementation.

This paper also highlights the important roles played by nature and cultural tourists in Samoa. A wider array of nature tourism products in Samoa (thanks to the Green Turtle Project) is attracting more visitors to Samoa and possibly hastening natural resource conservation efforts and hence assisting sustainable tourism initiatives. However, numerous constraints to sustainable tourism are highlighted in this paper, constraints that have existed for more than ten to twenty and are unlikely to improve unless we call for a Commission of Enquiry into the current demise of our natural resources and other tourism assets.

Introduction

In this presentation, we are here to discuss the relationship between tourism and natural resource management. Despite all the meetings, reports, global conventions, environmentally focused regional organisations (i.e. SPREP, FFA, FAO, SPC, SPTO, etc.) Samoa and the South Pacific continue to lose their natural resources. These are being depleted at alarming rates, possibly being depleted at increasing rates (e.g. with Samoa possibly having one of the world's highest rates of deforestation). The recent global environment and development

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meetings in Brazil (1992) and South Africa (2002) revealed that the world is moving away from sustainability, not closer towards attaining it.

Think about this for a moment

Some tourism industry stakeholders in Samoa are frustrated by the apparent national apathy to do tourism better. Like the newly graduated faifeau who complained to God that his first sermon was delivered in a village without a church, in the middle of a malae surrounded by cows, God's reply was "My son, you may find in future that it will be easier to move the cows than it may be to move the people". And this is how hard it has been for some of the presenters here today to move the natural resource management decision-makers in Samoa. With ten to twenty years of rhetoric, environmental advice given to governments being ignored, insufficient Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) legislation in place and so forth, it is no wonder that our natural resources in Samoa continue to disappear and hence undermine our tourism industry. Government's recent call for a Forestry and Forest Products Management Advisory Committee may be too late to save our forests. We need an urgent moratorium on logging on Savaii to prevent further damage to such natural resources and our unique and vital biodiversity.

With global atmospheric oxygen levels expected to fall by the year 2012, human sperm counts declining rapidly over the past 50 years, newly identified toxic 'Persistent Hormonal Disruptors' being detected in plastics, human foetal development being altered, Samoa has reason to take action, environmentally speaking. Attaining sustainable livelihoods in Samoa is becoming more of a dream than a reality. We owe it to our children.

The signs are already here

While Western man has become so de-spiritualized, so has the Faa-Samoa. The Faamatai is breaking down. Our matais are the decision-makers and the law-makers. Do we care about the next generation of Samoans? If we do, we would all agree to do it differently. All we need is to make a connection here:

- i.) Between our natural resources as our tourism assets
- ii.) Between loss of natural resources and loss of our culture
- iii.) Between the loss of our culture and the loss of our spirituality and
- iv.) Between the loss of our natural resources equating to loss of our tourism sector as possibly our best income-generating option for future generations of Samoans.

Action needed

Today, Samoans have few options to their non-sustainable practices. Some novel tourism and environmental initiatives, therefore, need to be taken if we are to use tourism as our best environmental management tool in Samoa. Historically, Samoa's tourism development workers have had little positive influence over natural resource conservation in Samoa over the past ten to twenty years i.e. we have all witnessed this wholesale decline in our natural resources and even witnessed the current deliberate degradation of our unique wildlife conservation areas in Samoa, for example the Tafua Rainforest Preserve on Savaii Island. Concurrently, natural resource managers and biodiversity conservation projects in Samoa in the past ten to twenty years have had little influence over community tourism development in most Samoan villages i.e. had we known then what we know today about community tourism development, earlier natural resource management efforts in Samoa over the past ten to twenty years may have been a lot more effective, and nature tourism may have commenced much earlier in Samoa as a viable tourism product as well as acting as a valuable

environmental management tool (Sooaemalelagi et al., 1996). This paper is a call for more action to be taken.

Novel Tourism Initiatives

So, what urgent steps need to be taken to facilitate tourism protecting Samoa's natural resources? Basically, a high quality yet affordable ecotourism/community tourism product need to be designed in Samoa that:

- (i) Increased the number of ideal travellers to Samoa
- (ii) Developed innovative interpretive materials that would enrich tourist's environmental and cultural experiences (e.g. Green Turtle websites, Green Turtle travel guides, souvenir book
- (iii) Helped to raise environmental awareness nationally
- (iv) Vastly increased the number of bed-nights in rural Samoa and
- (v) Increased our visitors' satisfaction

The services offered by the Green Turtle Tours Project, including the Travellers' Lounge, have helped to offer travelers to Samoa the tourism infrastructure and travel information necessary in rural areas to help meet such visitor expectations. However, current inappropriate natural resource management practices in Samoa are undermining the future of one of Samoa's most profitable sectors: tourism. Surprisingly, our tourism industry (including the Samoan Tourism Authority) have stood on the sideline and watched the decline of Samoa's best tourism industry assets i.e. natural resources.

In addition, a wide range of novel holiday products (tours, activities, accommodations and services) needed to be designed for international travelers as well as Samoan (American included), and implemented and offered to our travelers at affordable prices (Sooaemalelagi et al., 2003). Holiday products such as a rainforest canopy walkway, mangrove walkways, mangrove canoe tours, bird watching tours, bird hides, beach fales, walking trails, trekking, surfing, sea kayaking, volunteerism, 'Woofers' , educational tours, etc. are now all included in many Samoan holiday itineraries. Simultaneously, an informal accreditation process was put in place by the Green Turtle Project for those 'beach fales' and tourist accommodations as well as 'rural tourism villages' which already met minimal environmental standards or had a wildlife conservation project in place or offered visitors a genuine and safe Samoan holiday experience. The end result of such initiatives was a high quality tourism product (the Green Turtle Tour and its associated Green Turtle Holiday Packages) that hopefully will continue to help protect the environment and, hopefully, the culture (see www.greenturtletours.com and www.greenturtleholidays.com).

The Green Turtle Tour Project has successfully demonstrated that effective web-marketing is an essential ingredient to increasing the number of visitors to Samoa who are seeking nature/cultural tourism experiences. Unfortunately, many such travelers have had to bypass their conventional travel agents who

- (i) Have been unfamiliar with such nature/cultural holiday products in Samoa
- (ii) Have only offered resort/hotel holidays in Samoa
- (iii) May be unfamiliar with the real benefits of nature tourism and cultural tourism products in Samoa
- (iv) Offer, either deliberately or accidentally, misinformation to travellers with respect to where they should stay in Samoa (and where they cannot stay) and what activities they can expect to participate in when they get to Samoa and

- (v) Polynesian Airlines underestimates the importance of rural economic stimulation through rural tourism (beach fale operators have been denied discount Beach Fale Holiday Packages for \$999 for 5 nights in Beach Fales inclusive of airfare). While there may be legitimate reasons in the past for this policy, these reasons no longer apply as the quality in selected accredited Beach Fales is now of a high international travel standard. In addition, community tourism is another tourism product in Samoa that does not compete with urban hotel or resort tourism packages.

Therefore, what Samoa now needs are more sophisticated novel nature and cultural tourism products that are attractive to our visitors and village stakeholders. To assist this goal, the Green Turtle Tour Project is working with aid donors, development agencies, tourism and environmental researchers/consultants, media, etc. to demonstrate what it takes to implement a sophisticated nature tourism and cultural tourism program that truly benefits natural resource conservation and sustainable development in Samoa, focusing on community tourism web-marketing, innovative nature tourism products, innovative cultural tourism products to name a few. Our five main websites: www.greenturtletours.com, www.greenturtleholidays.com, www.GoSamoa.com, www.ecotoursamoa.com and www.Samoa-Hotels.com are now selling these novel holiday products and activities to a targeted audience.

Novel environmental initiatives

To the credit of some of our key rural tourism stakeholders, they have adopted a much higher standard of environmental management which is now meeting and exceeding visitor expectations. Not only are the physical (waterfalls, caves, cliffs, mountains) and biological (rainforests, mangroves, and marine) environments being protected as wildlife conservation areas and tourist attractions, but numerous socio-economic and cultural aspects are also being addressed via rural-based community tourism. Green Turtle travellers are now being encouraged and invited to participate in sound tourism development.

Tourism development and environmental management are indeed complimentary. Therefore, some novel environmental initiatives needed to be taken (from a nature tourism marketing perspective) if we were to also use environmental management as our best tourism development tool in Samoa. Samoa needs a good model community tourism project that clearly demonstrates improved sustainable management of our natural resources at a local level. Community tourism in Samoa is now being recognized as a significant environmental management tool and Samoa should be given a chance to allow tourism to work more positively in rural villages where increasing social, economic, biological, cultural and physical hardships are being faced by these communities. While the recent 5 year Tourism Development Plan for Samoa addresses the need to attain sustainable tourism, the processes required to achieve this have been somewhat overlooked. Also, the relationship between the Samoan Tourism Authority and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment needs to be strengthened if we are to have an effective and holistic effort being made on-island.

Fortunately, Samoa boasts a long list of environmental projects and initiatives that, today are directly aiding tourism development. Conversely, many of the following environmental projects would not have been as successful (or as financially viable) had it not been for their initial tourism impact. For example, some argue that the establishment of conservation areas with cash handouts is counter-productive (for example, National Park of American Samoa and Falealupo Rainforest Conservation Area) but the Rainforest Canopy Walkway on Savaii is probably Samoa's most profitable existing wildlife conservation income-generating project

(not to mention the 'highlight' for some travellers to Savaii. Unfortunately, the financial return on investment for some environmental projects has been minimal where little to no tourism infrastructure and benefits were derived (for example, Saanapu, Sataoa, Aopo, Uafato Conservation Areas to name a few). More tourist amenities and activities still need to be included in these Conservation Areas if the best environmental benefits are to be derived from such projects. Once community tourism ventures are more profitable, then commitment from the villagers to protect their natural resources suddenly increases (mainly because our visitors tend to cancel village accommodations within such Conservation Areas if live conch shells and other marine-life are being sold, if trees are being felled, if rubbish is not being disposed of correctly, if spent shotgun cartridges litter the nature trails as in the Uafato Conservation Area, etc.). Nature tourism should be a learning experience for visitors, villagers and tour operators.

Samoa now has an exciting network of conservation areas, national parks and marine protected areas offering culturally-sensitive and environmentally-friendly affordable accommodation and holiday activities thus putting tourist dollars into rural economies to help eliminate rural poverty, assist with gender equity, and facilitate improvement of local environment and cultural practices. As a result, community tourism can be innovative way of selling environmental advice to local village stakeholders on their terms, thus maximising their financial and environmental returns with little extra risk provided we follow some Community Tourism Best Practices (See Appendix 1).

Constraints to natural resource conservation and sustainable tourism

Thaman (2002) redefined ecotourism (community tourism) as a multi-faceted discipline with numerous far-reaching positive impacts. Many tourism development workers in Samoa have a long history of working within the tourism industry using their political, academic, environmental, financial, marketing, publishing and conservation experience. Without such skills and resources today, our interpretation of our environment and culture to our visitors would not be of the high standard that it is today. Along with good interpretation comes good management. However, we still do not have all the information we need and further tourism research in Samoa is required.

The positive and negative impacts of tourism in Samoa now need to be further researched and monitored if Samoa is to strive for attaining sustainable tourism. Internationally, tourism has become recognized as a true science, and sustainable tourism indicators have already been identified for Samoa (Twining-Ward, 2003). As tourism is now one of our major sources of foreign income, organizations like the Cooperative Research Center for Sustainable Tourism in Australia are willing to stimulate a cooperative research effort within the South Pacific (and Samoa) to boost sound environmental tourism practices within the region. However, Samoa has been very slow on the uptake of collaborative tourism research, hence the justification for an 'Environmental Tourism Trust' being formed in Samoa that will help encourage such research.

The Samoan tourism industry's main foundation is its natural and cultural resources, currently are both over-exploited or eroded through poor governance and poor management. On some occasions, these tourism assets are better appreciated by our visitors than by our own villagers, environmental managers and government planners. Environmental Impact Assessment legislation needs to be introduced promptly to ameliorate the negative environmental impacts that are occurring in Samoa and that are directly undermining the future viability of our tourism industry and our ability to attain sustainable livelihoods within

the near future. At this rate, our children will inherit an impoverished island ecosystem that no amount of aid money can restore (e.g. ask why we are spending so much aid donor funds on water reticulation when we logged our forests for so little return in the past). Mind you, we are still logging our forests non-sustainably with apparently less than 18 months of millable accessible rainforest remaining, and we are still asking our aid donors to assist us despite our current non-sustainable practices. Our aid donors could do more than give further funding: they could assist on a certain level of commitment (by both the public and private sectors) to sustainability. This paper is a strong call to both the private sector and public sector to do more for tourism, more natural resource management.

We didn't inherit this nation from our ancestors, we borrowed it from our children promising to return it to them in better shape, But we have broken this promise.

Discussion

The government of the day must be held responsible for

- (i) Continued (past 20-30 years) non-sustainable and possibly illegal forest logging practices
- (ii) Cattle grazing within our water catchments
- (iii) Continued non-sustainable agricultural practices
- (iv) Dismissal of local landowners as key future tourism development stakeholders.

To help address these constraints to a more sound tourism development and natural resource conservation within Samoa, the Green Turtle Tour Project has initiated the establishment of a Green Turtle Resort Development Fund and an 'Environmental Tourism Trust' as a collaborative effort to highlight local tourism opportunities for local landowners. The Green Turtle Tour Project will soon help generate a further 10,000 additional bed-nights annually, providing direct benefits to local environmental, social, planning, economic and development projects in rural villages.

Further blame must be put directly on the local tourism industry for discounting our local environmental challenges as a direct threat to attaining a more sustainable tourism industry in Samoa. In addition, our own hotel industry, airlines, inbound tour operators, and cruise ship operators are today partially, but collectively, responsible for misinformation being offered to our visitors to Samoa in a direct marketing effort to boost conventional room occupancy rates and related travel commissions being paid to agents (at considerable expense to our rural economies). However, with a greater emphasis on affordable web-marketing, discerning travellers can get better access to more accurate travel information at more affordable prices on the Internet (and beach fale owners can reach potential travellers before they reach Samoa). This is equating to a more meaningful and more sustainable Samoan holiday experience with even more direct benefits to rural villagers and villages than ever before.

This deliberate misinformation being offered (both locally and internationally) to our travellers prompted the recent establishment of the Green Turtle Travellers' Lounge, the Green Turtle Resort Development Fund and the 'Environmental Tourism Trust'. Rural tourism stakeholders were being jeopardized even further by additional misinformation and/or oversights, namely:

- (i) That our key tourism assets do not include our natural resources (but protecting our natural resources will only strengthen our tourism industry);

- (ii) That local landowners cannot easily access credit (and yet greater access to credit is available today in Samoa than ever before: e.g. SBEC, WIB, SPTB Bank, Green Turtle RDF, etc.);
- (iii) That local landownership issues constrain tourism development (this is not true for community tourism resorts where the landowners operate their own tourism resorts on their own terms);
- (iv) That beach fale accommodation is a sub-standard for international travellers (this is no longer the case as beach fale standards continue to rise, sometimes exceeding conventional urban tourist accommodations and urban restaurants); and
- (v) That Samoa is an expensive South Pacific holiday destination (the Green Turtle Tour Project offers inexpensive holiday packages for less than USD\$30/day).

In addition, more access to credit from within Samoa is the key answer to sound (community) tourism development. This credit access needs to be simplified, and more accessible resort planning and development advice at a rural community level is needed. Samoa also needs to encourage tourism research via local and regional universities, with considerable focus on the design and construction of low cost, cyclone resistant, traditional fales that meet travellers' expectations. The Green Turtle Tour Project is building a unique design of traditional beach fales that meets visitors' expectations.

A conscientious web-marketing effort is now being made by the Green Turtle Project to offer affordable community tourism holidays in Samoa that

- (i) Meet minimal standards
- (ii) Involve travellers in local biodiversity conservation efforts
- (iii) Offer mutual travel learn experiences for visitors as well as villagers
- (iv) Boost rural employment
- (v) Encourage gender equity
- (vi) Encourage the introduction of alternate technologies that may be more environmentally-friendly than existing technologies and
- (vii) Helps address rural poverty.

Conclusion

Samoa's tourism industry stakeholders are the Government of Samoa, the Village Councils of Chiefs and the private sector. However, who lobbies who for the changes that are needed or the direction that should be taken is uncertain. No one on island is calling for a Commission of Enquiry into our failure to protect our own natural resources, our failure to protect our heritage, our failure to protect our culture or our failure to strengthen our tourism industry. No one is holding our politicians or Councils of Chiefs responsible for their poor management of our natural resources in the past. No one has successfully demanded Government to gazette the EIA legislation for Samoa (not even our Aid Donors). But may be Cabinet can assist with this process?

What Samoa's tourism industry needs is more involvement from key rural community tourism stakeholders in order to avoid the negative impacts of tourism already being recognised in Samoa and elsewhere (e.g. Lalomanu, Manase, Hawaii, Tahiti, Cook Islands and Fiji). This is warranted if our communities are to maximise their benefits from tourism in both the short term and long term.

- (i) More community consultation
- (ii) Less natural resource degradation
- (iii) Improved web-marketing of nature and cultural tourism products

- (iv) Better informative interpretive materials
- (v) More tourism research and
- (vi) Improved tourist information are all warranted

However, the apathy that exists within the tourism industry in Samoa is self-defeating. Improved public sector/private sector initiatives are urgently needed and a call has been put out to the Minister of Tourism to assist with this process.

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