

## **Improving community skills and knowledge to build, enhance and promote environmental stewardship**

*Allamanda Amituana'i and Fatima Sauafea\**

### **Abstract**

American Samoa has undergone major environmental changes over the century as change is inevitable. In fact, these changes have come so rapidly that most of the islands' natural resources have been declined and depleted for many years. The causes of this decline and depletion are due to poor management, overexploitation, natural disasters, and human activities. As these threats increase their effects on the environment and its resources, so does the need to educate and integrate management tools with existing management efforts to improve community support, participation, and collaboration in managing the resources. With the intent of strengthening and empowering the community to take up stewardship roles, several government agencies have utilized resource management tools in designing their programs and activities implemented in the community.

Keywords are - collaborative management; community participation stewardship, and network.

### **Introduction**

The American Samoan people are well acquainted with their environment. Some people still depend on the resources for survival while others live comfortably with the luxury money can buy. We take for granted what we see daily that we do not see the problems that our environment is faced with. The Department of Commerce's Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the office of National Marine Fisheries team up to provide means of Improving Community Skills and Knowledge, to Build, Enhance and Promote Environmental Stewardship.

Located south of the equator, American Samoa is the only United States territory that lies in the South Pacific. It is composed of seven islands; five volcanic islands and two atolls. The main island of Tutuila is where most of the American Samoa population resides. A small percentage of the population is spread throughout the islands of Aunuu, Ofu, Olosega and Tau. The land area is 76 square miles and the population is about 65,000. The major industries serving the territory are the two canneries, Samoa Packing and Star Kist.

With the rapid increase of population this has become problematic for the islanders. There is now less land area and pressure has been exerted in addition to threats on the resources of American Samoa. The major problem that the islands are currently faced with is the decline of Coastal and Marine Resources.

### **Existing management efforts**

There are existing management efforts by the government to address the issues but this has very little or no impact on the local people's behaviors towards stewardship. The Coral Reef Advisory Group identified four major threats to Coral Reefs, which are over fishing, Climate

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\* Ms. Amituana'i works for the Department of Commerce and Ms. Sauafea the JIMAR/NMFS - Pacific Island Regional Office, American Samoa.

Change, Overpopulation, and Land-based Sources of Pollution. Other Resource Management Agencies have also designed plans to address these threats. An Ocean Resource Management Plan also exists which addresses the Four Resource Areas of Near shore, Harbor, Watershed, Territorial and High Seas. In addition to that, each agency has its own management plan that helps to manage the mandated resources and focus areas within their scope of work.

Management slows down or sometimes fail to achieve its goals because the community does not support or act upon the efforts to manage their resources. A community in general involves the whole territory, while this target is not manageable the government has systematically broken down specific groups that are identified as target audiences whether it be those who share common functions, religion, occupation, or the few who share values and may consist of groups who are resource users (e.g. fishermen and farmers) etc. By doing this the programs are designed to address issues and concerns of the stakeholders. There is no room for improvement if there is a lack of participation support and collaboration from the community. As a result, the problems will continue to increase, while the resources decline.

### **Community participation and support**

Local people know the causes and remedies to many problems with our resources and environment. They know where to find and use plants with unique properties and they have good systems to prevent damage to crops and seedlings by wild animals. They can offer shelter, labor, food and tools. Local people also offer flexibility to projects, and they allow them to respond to local conditions, thus projects are likely to be more effective and successful. Involving these people in the planning and management of the resources can help build support by investing their interest in the well being of their natural resources, fill in some gaps when government or other resource organizations lack the necessary funds and personnel for effective resource management, and make resource management more responsive to variations and changes in social and environmental conditions. In addition, the management of the resources will be more effective when communities are ensured that the benefits from managing the resources reach the same communities and that the cultural, social and economic needs and concerns of the communities affected by the resources are addressed.

It is important that the local knowledge of the community with natural resources is integrated into resource management. Moreover, providing the community with training and educational opportunities for skills development will enhance their participation in the management effort.

Not only does community participation aid effectiveness, but it is more efficient where the local knowledge helps to minimize wasted time and energy, and can deliver results more rapidly. Community participation has been a process whereby local knowledge, skills and resources can be mobilized and fully used. The participation of the local people provides a degree of assurance that conservation and management initiatives are more likely to be sustainable, since local people should have the most direct interests in the positive outcomes of such initiatives.

Collaborative management is one of the most effective tools to ensure community participation in resource management. It is an essential feature of the emerging face of conservation. More and more planners and authorities are realizing that sharing management rights and responsibilities with various stakeholders – local communities in particular – is the surest way to the long term conservation and management of natural resources. Other

management tools include social communication, information gathering and assessment, planning, conflict management, monitoring and evaluation.

### **Existing community-based programs**

A good example of collaborative management is being practiced in American Samoa through a Community-based Fisheries Management Program under the management of the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources. The Community-Based Fisheries Management Program was installed to assist villages in managing and conserving their in-shore fishery resources by a voluntary scheme of co-management with the government. Its goal is to enhance ownership and stewardship of the marine resources by the village community. The program aims toward improving fishing and sustainable development of marine resources in the villages. For this, identification of village sites to establish Marine Reserves or Marine Protected Areas is featured. In addition, the restocking of giant clams in the protected areas, as part of the Department's assistance in the program enhances the development of good fishing practices and management approaches.

The Community-Based Fisheries Management Program in American Samoa was adopted from a similar program in Samoa under the Fisheries Office. Although the two Samoas practice the same traditions and culture, the difference in life styles and economies play a difference in the manner which the programs are being implemented. Thus, the program development process is essentially the same with few exceptions to meet the system and regulations organized in American Samoa.

One program that aims at advocating support from the future leaders of American Samoa is the "Save-A-Beach Program" coordinated by the Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary. The program target schools that are of close proximity to beach areas. The schools are encouraged to adopt an area of the beach where they will hold monthly clean-ups, test the water quality, while at the same time are being educated on the effects of our daily activities on our resources. The hands on approach are to challenge the students to experience first hand the problems we are faced with and instill a sense of stewardship within them. The Sanctuary Office coordinates the program with the hope to encourage the teachers and students to take up ownership of the program.

### **Expectations from community participation and support**

The expectations from having the Community or local people participate, support, and collaborate in resource management and related activities include the following:

1. Local knowledge, skills and resources are fully utilized;
2. Increased efficiency and effectiveness;
3. Sharing of problem awareness, resource potential and opportunities;
4. A pool of knowledge and skills;
5. Promotion of local self-reliance.

It is the hope of many resource managers that the effective collaboration and management of the resources by the government and local people will result in more healthy and abundant resources for tomorrow. For future effectiveness and long-term success of managing the resources in American Samoa, there is a need to develop a community network for better collaboration among local communities and community training on ways to improve enforcement and management of the resources.

As one wise fisherman once said, 'With evaluation and assessment of these management efforts and local action strategies to meet social needs, biological significance, economical status, and improving the sustainable development of the resources, American Samoa's journey to manage and protect its resources will surely be achieved with its sails adjusted to the wind'.