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“STRIVING TOWARDS ECOTOURISM IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS”

by

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is developing into new regions of the world all of the time, and particularly in the Solomon Islands, a country in the South Pacific Ocean. The Solomon Islands has potential to be more involved in nature based sustainable tourism, as it has many attractive natural, historical, and cultural landmarks. Additionally, the Solomon Islands has not been heavily developed with traditional tourism. Nonetheless, there are many challenges facing the people of these breathtaking tropical islands, in capitalizing on an ecotourism model. ¹

DESCRIPTION OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

The Solomon Islands is located east of Papua New Guinea. The country consists of 992 islands, which make up the third largest archipelago in the South Pacific. The islands were formed approximately 25 million years ago by volcanic activity, which makes the geography of the area interesting to tourists. Other features include the abundance of rainforests and coral reefs, as well as unique culture. The Solomon Islands is considered to be “developing” and therefore has limited infrastructure. Outside of the capital, Honiara, life is lived very simply.¹

There are many features and reasons that make the Solomon Islands an ideal destination for successful ecotourism. The region offers exquisite tropical islands, which are predominantly covered in dense rainforest and have over 4500 plant species, including many rare orchid species. In addition, “The Solomon Islands have one of the world's most distinctive (selection of birds)...more than any other endemic bird area in the world.” There are 173 species with 40 of those considered as being rare” (Kratter, *et al.* 2001). The vast coral reefs provide significant marine biodiversity and some of the world’s best diving, including shipwrecks from World War II. The war history is also very evident on the islands and attracts many American and Japanese veterans to historical sites, including the famous and important Battle of Guadalcanal. Traditional skull shrines and “Tambu” areas dating back hundreds of years are scattered throughout the country. These islands were traditionally home to unique cultural activities, tribal warfare and in some cases included headhunting and cannibalism. Traditions have changed since those days, partially due to the influences of missionaries in the 1700’s, and there is now a very different way of life.

There are several areas that have been acknowledged as being important from ecological, geographical and cultural perspectives. The province of Rennell and Bellona boasts the largest enclosed freshwater body in the South Pacific and was declared by UNESCO as being a World Heritage Site. Marovo Lagoon, in Western Province, has also been tagged as requiring protection status by UNESCO. Sadly, in the lagoon there is extensive and unregulated resource

¹ www.visitsolomons.com.sb.

exploitation, particularly logging and fishing, which is threatening the significant tourism potential of the Marovo Lagoon.

The Solomon Islands is a destination for adventure seekers who don't look for convenience, but rather look for destinations that offer a simple life and limited technology. Most ecotourists are by nature, (excuse the pun) more flexible and open to change. Lack of infrastructure within a natural setting is part of the attraction of the Solomon Islands.

DEFINING ECOTOURISM

Genuine ecotourism involves mindful planning, and requires that the government and all stakeholders understand what the plan is and how it can be achieved. One problem with implementation is that there are many similar definitions of ecotourism and it is, therefore, difficult to agree upon and use a short definition that encompasses all aspects. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people". That definition is widely used, but it leaves some areas open for interpretation, which then can cause disagreements during planning and within the ecotourism community.

Another definition describes "...genuine Ecotourism as tourism that financially supports environmental conservation, monitors and tries to minimise its environmental impact, increases environmental and cultural knowledge, allows sincere communication between guest and host, and operates with the consent and participation as equals of the host community." (*ECOCLUB.com*). The ideas from these two international organizations provide a basis for what many believe to be contemporary ecotourism.

DEFINING CHALLENGES FACING THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

While the Solomon Islands provide excellent opportunities, there are still significant barriers obstructing ecotourism from reaching its fullest potential. A coup d'état was staged in 2000 and the country is still suffering from socio-economic problems and ethnic tensions. In turn, there is unrest and disagreement about how the nation should be governed. This unsettled political situation has combined to further enhance unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, primarily fishing and logging, that threatens the future of the country both environmentally and economically. As a result, the country's ability to develop its economy to include more tourism and ecotourism is limited.

Travel advisories from several nations have been posted internationally, encouraging travelers to avoid the Solomon Islands. According to local authorities, many of these national advisories are inaccurate, and over stress the situation making it look more dangerous than it actually is. The Solomon Islands therefore appears to be an extremely unsafe place for visitors. Although problems exist, they tend to be self-contained and do not specifically threaten tourists. The result of these travel advisories is that the tour operators are struggling to survive without an influx of tourist dollars (Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau 2002).

There are other challenges within the socio-economic aspect of the country that also hinder development of ecotourism. One example is that there are low levels of education, as school fees are expensive and there are insufficient qualified teachers available. Often families have many children so are unable to afford to send them all to school. The result of this, combined with other factors, is a low literacy rate (Shearer 2000). Those with less education are more susceptible to exploitation by others. If there are misunderstandings about the importance of conservation and environment, then uninformed decisions can easily be made. For example, this can often occur in situations such as logging negotiations, when a multinational logging company approaches a village with a contract. If no one can fully read the details of the contract, they often are convinced to sign and then live with the results of a logged forest and no help with effective reforestation.²

Land disputes are another obstacle with ecotourism development (Shearer 2000). Within the culture of the Solomon Islands, there are often issues related to land claims. The problem usually does not arise until a family member starts a business, then relatives emerge asking to share in profits of the new business or oppose the project. It is difficult then to operate the business successfully, as there are disagreements about how it should be managed and who will share in the profit.

BENEFITS OF ECOTOURISM

Genuine ecotourism, if implemented successfully, would reduce the need or desire for exploitative industries with negative impacts such as unsustainable logging, and would actually enhance the ecotourism and sustainable potential of the site. The nation would then likely be rewarded with viable sources of income rather than the current destructive economy, which relies upon logging and fishing at unsustainable rates. At the present time, there are not enough trees replanted or fish replaced to sustain these industries (Hunt 2000). Ecotourism happens slowly, making it difficult to see immediate financial benefit as well as to convince governments that in the long run it will be more valuable. The situation in Yunnan China had similar challenges; there

² Maklili 2002.

was excessive logging and depletion of culture in the area that threatened its future. With the help of the Nature Conservancy, the region successfully developed ecotourism and greatly reduced the problem of excessive logging of old growth forests.

The Solomon Islands is not alone in the challenge of developing ecotourism, most nations in the world struggle to find a balance between profiting from available resources and keeping areas of the environment protected.

METHODS FOR INCREASING ECOTOURISM IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

More established ecotourism could become a reality if a number of changes took place in the Solomon Islands. Some of these include focusing on environmental and cultural protection, developing more ecotourism operations paired with establishing nearby protected areas, and marketing the destination to attract more ecotourists. Various barriers are preventing this from happening at the moment, but if the majority of obstacles were to be removed, it could allow facilitation of a feasible, more sustainable form of economic development.

Ethnic problems are still present in some parts of the country, but the areas where travelers go are generally free of this type of socio-economic unrest. "There have been few regional investigations of effects on the tourism industry of violence and instability of the South Pacific. However, although the areas suffer during violent times, usually as soon as the danger passes, regular tourism resumes" (Pizam 1995). Fiji has experienced similar challenges to those of the Solomon Islands with past coups, fortunately for Fiji, there was enough support for tourism and it was able to return to normal levels of visitor numbers following the ethnic tensions.

Environmental and Cultural Protection

For several reasons, the Solomon Islands would benefit from having ecotourism as a major part of their economic development strategy. The principles instilled in the concept of ecotourism are of sustainable resource use with longer-term economic, cultural and social beliefs than as opposed to those in resource exploitation practices currently run in many areas of the Solomon Islands. There are not many years remaining for these virgin rainforest and reefs if the multi-national companies are allowed to come to fish and log at the same rate that they are doing now. There will be little chance of recovery. Ecotourism insists that rainforests and reefs be preserved, forcing the government to consider sustainable resource harvesting and getting the best of both worlds. The economic return on investment in ecotourism is usually far slower than that of conventional economic development. However, the benefits are far more sustainable and can actually accrue over time, as resources are managed and preserved for the benefit of future

generations. Unsustainable rates of tropical hardwood exploitation and over-fishing are seriously threatening the rainforest and reef habitats in the Solomon Islands.

The preservation of local culture for the Solomon Islanders is vital to the success of the country. According to informal surveys of various villages (Ell 2002), many Solomon Islanders believe that loss of culture is much more damaging than environmental degradation. The reason is that village elders are passing away and traditional stories, in many cases, have not been properly recorded. This is because the traditional story telling to pass on family information and history has significantly slowed down with the influx of Western ideals and development. The younger generations are more interested in moving to Honiara, to find work and live a perceived more comfortable, modern lifestyle. If no one is ensuring that traditions and customs, or Kastoms as they are referred to locally, are recorded and preserved then soon they will be gone with little hope of revitalization. Of course many developed societies are sadly at fault for not fully preserving their own culture. It would be fantastic if the Solomon Islanders could see the mistakes that were made in other countries and learn from them before it is too late. Genuine ecotourism ensures that culture is preserved, and not exploited, for the benefit and pride of the local residents.

A survey of Solomon Islands residents was conducted May to August 2002, the question sought to discover how ecotourism could benefit the country. "What if you did nothing and the country continued with the current economic development activities?" Popular responses include:

- There is currently a dangerously rapid loss of culture; without preservation of heritage, our traditions will disappear forever.
- Loss of natural resources at a dangerous rate threatens village life as many people still live off the land.
- There is a loss of community spirit when international developers take advantage of us and take away our rights to our own resources and land.
- Tourism has declined sadly, and we no longer receive the much-needed revenue from foreigners so that we can pay school fees, improve our living conditions and essentially survive.

(Ell 2002).

Authentic ecotourism is different from some mass tourism in that it will respect local indigenous culture and encourage its preservation for the right reasons. The villagers should be proud of their heritage and promote their culture in a way that reflects its true meaning. Internationally, tourists often request entertainment and over time ceremonies become exaggerated. The duplication of handcrafts and dances can become commercial as they are done for money and to suit tourist desires, meanwhile the original meaning can be forgotten.

Destination Marketing

A major marketing opportunity for increasing the number of ecotourists being exposed to the destination is the World Wide Web. With minimal investment to manage websites, the Solomon Islands can be marketed to the entire world much more economically than it could have been 10 years ago using traditional means. The number of tourists booking vacations online is on the rise (AC Nielsen 2001), which will certainly help the country to compete, even with limited financial resources.

The ecolodges themselves would greatly benefit from increased advice and support through international marketing and partnering with other operations to package experiences. These activities are very difficult in remote island regions, making the business operations even more challenging.

Increase the Establishment of Ecotourism

Presently, in Solomon Islands there are established ecotourism facilities and operators. The ones that are in operation have made it through the difficult times of the coup in 2000 and, therefore, have a desire to expand tourism. The most well-known ecolodge operation is Vanua Rapita in Marovo Lagoon. It is a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) project that helped the village of Michi to find an alternative to logging and fishing but still create an income that could sustain the village while preserving the environment and culture. Several other islands are present with ecolodges or potential ecotourism attractions within the Marovo Lagoon, but they require support in order to develop. If both the local community and government establish more marine protected areas and conservation areas, the ecolodges would have the assurance of long term success and could then move to increase the attraction to tourists.

Prior to the coup in 2000, aid donor organizations funded some ecolodges throughout the Western Province and the province of Rennell and Bellona. Unfortunately, due to the ethnic tension, and other related reasons, their funding and support has now ceased. The operators of these recently constructed ecolodges, who had been prepared with proper hospitality training to conduct ecotourism operations, found themselves with no assistance after the coup to get through the toughest time for them economically. They had little support with marketing and management advice. Over the past three years the lodges, hardly used by tourists, require more maintenance, however, with no income nor hope of tourists, there is little point in maintaining these facilities. Owners of these areas claim that they would have benefited by having more guidance about how to get by in troubled times (Ell 2002). The lodge owners and surrounding

communities would benefit from an influx of ecotourists so they can share their amazing part of the world while still preserving its ecological and cultural integrity. In return, the income that they earn will make a major difference by allowing them to get much needed medicine, education, and transportation to the capital of Honiara when needed.

NEXT STEPS

Many people do have faith that the Solomon Islands can get to a stage where ethnic disputes are reduced, the government represents the population's desires, and the culture and environment have a chance of survival. Although some aid donors and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) have left the area in frustration, there are still those who have confidence and continue to help. Those remaining are being more careful so that the projects which receive assistance are accountable for ensuring money and supplies go to the people who need it most. Presently, there is a strong effort by the British High Commission, which has brought in an international judge for the High Courts, as well as British Commissioner of Police and support staff to assist with the law and order situation. The Solomon Islands Visitor's Bureau has worked hard running campaigns to inform other countries that it is a desirable destination and that, in some cases, the media has misinformed the world about the troubles that do exist. The hope is that countries that represent potential markets will reduce their travel advisories in order to allow tourism to resume in the Solomons Islands. It is interesting to note that at a recent tourism exhibition held in Brisbane, the Solomon Island entry was deemed to be the most popular and exciting presentation.

Tourism numbers are increasing again, due on part to various activities. 2002 was the 60th anniversary of the WW II Battle of Guadalcanal. Many war veterans, relatives of those involved in the war, and tourists interested in war history came to the Solomon Islands and had very positive experiences. The historical tours, shipwreck diving and other aspects of the country made for many unique adventures. Summer 2003, will mark the 60th anniversary of the PT 109 ship being shot down in the Western Province. On board was Navy Lieutenant John F. Kennedy (prior to his being president of the USA) and crew. They had to swim to shore in the dark, and were rescued by a Solomon Islander. There is an anniversary swim planned for this summer, which is attracting many tourists who intend to follow the swim that JFK made 60 years earlier. Correspondingly, the PT 109 shipwreck was found last year and National Geographic was present to make a movie of the story.

SUMMARY

The Solomon Islands is currently struggling through many challenges. Once the post-coup political problems subside, ecotourism is an option for viable economic development. In combination with sustainable logging and fishing, genuine ecotourism would offer a better future that would include preservation of heritage, environment and local pride. As the nation is remote, has limited infrastructure, and is struggling through financial problems, it is difficult to pass up offers of quick fixes such as selling its old growth rainforests and allowing mass fishing operations. However, if the government stabilizes, ethnic tensions reduce, and they focus on long-term sustainability, then it may create a road to successful ecotourism. Plans could then be put into place that include increased ecotourism facilities and conservation areas as well as an expanded ecotourism destination marketing plan including assistance to the remote ecolodges. The Solomon Islands is a gem sitting in the South Pacific Ocean. As it has never developed as a mass tourism destination, and has many remote features that are attractive to ecotourists, it presents a unique opportunity to become better known on the map as the "Solomon Islands: Ecotourism Destination of the South Pacific" (Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau 2003).

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Biography of the Author

Laura Ell will finish her Applied Degree in Ecotourism and Outdoor Leadership at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Canada December 2003. Laura's experience includes traveling extensively to 25 countries and living abroad for over three years throughout the South Pacific and Middle East. During the International Year of Ecotourism 2002, she worked as an Ecotourism Advisor in the Solomon Islands for both the European Union's Micro Projects Programme, and The Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (a division of the Solomon Island's Ministry of Tourism). Over that time, many villages throughout the country consulted her for advice as they strived towards conservation of the amazing natural features and promoting their region as an ecotourists paradise.

Laura is passionate about working in the area of community development and promoting sustainable tourism, as well as sharing the enjoyment of travel with others.

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