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Environmental Problems And Policies,
And Media Reporting In Tonga

By

Sione Tu'itahi
I.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AND POLICIES, AND MEDIA REPORTING IN TONGA


Introduction

For thousand of years, before they come to contact with the outside world, Tongans lived in harmony with their environment. A balance was somehow struck between this give-and-take relationship with Mother Nature.

The Kingdom of Tonga is a nation of 170 small islands in the mid-Pacific Ocean of which 40 are inhabited by its Polynesian population of 95,000. We export squash pumpkin, vanilla, copra, banana, wollen garment and handicraft, and sell our tourism services to collect an average annual total of $20 million. Our average annual export is $60 million. The annual $40 million trade deficit is bridged with remittances of $30 million per annum from another 50,000 Tongans who have made New Zealand, Australia and the United States their home over the last 30 years. Foreign aid also help to balance the trade gap.

Under our constitutional monarchy, the present king rules with the guidance of a 117-year-old constitution, which has ensured Tonga's political independence, and which has been amended over the years to meet changes in the social, economic and political environment within the country and beyond. The national language is Tongan and English is widely used. Literacy rate is 99%.

The Mass Media

The mass media in Tonga is relatively a new industry. However, it is enjoying a fast and strong growth, especially in the private sector over the last 10 years. By the last count, Tonga has two weekly newspapers, four monthlies, and one bi-monthly magazine. The economics of the business means that daily newspapers are not viable yet. In the broadcast media, there are two radio stations, and two television stations. Except for one radio and one weekly newspaper, the media are privately owned. Tonga is also served with the short-wave services of the BBC, Australian Broadcasting Corp, Radio New Zealand International, and many national and international magazines and newspapers.

There are 40 working journalists and media practitioners in Tonga. All are members of the Tonga News Association, a national body which was established in early 1991 to assist in maintaining and upgrading the standard of the
2. **Environment/Media/Tonga**

Journalism profession, and to continue to safeguard the freedom of the media which is provided by the constitution. The association organizes, conducts, or acts as channel for training opportunities.

**Environmental Problems**

Tonga, like other countries, is facing a wide range of environmental problems; some are caused by natural phenomena, and some by man's over exploitation of nature.

Damage to the Tongan environment was increasingly more visible and vast in the last three decades as the country began to shift from subsistence to money-based economy and population growth became higher.

Development were centralised to a few towns and urban drift was the result. For example, in the capital, Nuku'alofa, low-lying areas, usually flooded when rain have been settled by migrants from the outer islands who flocked in to seek better standard of living and education for their children. Such settlements have spread out and destroyed large areas of mangroves and other coastal vegetation, along with several forms of sea life which was on the menu of protein supply to a large number of the city's population.

Rock and sand mining is another environmental problem. In more and more people are moving away from traditional building materials and favour modern houses, more and more beaches are degraded.

Certain farming practices and fishing methods have not helped to preserve the environment. These include dynamiting of fish, coral breaking, poisoning of fish. Once abundant fishing grounds around the coastal areas of the bigger islands in Tonga are now barren and almost dead because of over fishing and the damaging methods people use. These days fishermen have to go deeper and deeper into the sea to catch fish that they used to catch from the coastal reefs ten to 20 years ago. The amount of chemicals used by farmers over the past 30 years is causing great concern among authorities and the public. Studies are now being made to ascertain the quality of underground water for human consumption. Non-cultural has been adopted by more and more farmers who aim at exporting. The practice upset the ecological balance of nature and all farmers are facing an army of almost uncontrolable pests of harmfuls.

"Great care should be taken with great concern over the continuous nuclear tests in the Pacific, and the use of certain islands as dumping or transmutation for toxic waste".
Along with other small island nations, Tonga is worrying over the global warming and ozone layer stories. As scientists begin to argue against and for these findings, we are more confused, especially when we know that our small cluster of islands straddles over a strong earthquake belt in a part of the world which is the favourite visiting area for cyclones and other adverse weather effects caused by the El Niño phenomenon.

**ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY**

By the turn of the 20 century, Tonga had already had laws aimed at protecting the environment. Specifically, these legislations provided protection for certain endangered species of birds, animals, and trees. However, it was only in the last two decades that environmental problems began to be taken up seriously by both the government and the public. As the government moved in the seventies to make measures for preserving the environment, it formulated policies and made decisions to ensure the implementations of those policies. The Ministry of Lands and Survey was redesignated as Ministry of Lands, Survey, and Natural Resources. One year later, the same ministry established an environment unit, as well as an energy planning unit. Other ministries were given additional responsibilities which are related to environmental conservation. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries began a reforestation scheme, growing timber wood trees and cultural trees, as well as an educational program for fishermen and school children throughout the islands, with the assistance of the Ministry of Education.

The cooperation among various sectors of the Tongan community to clean up and preserve their environment is best witnessed during the annual environmental awareness week, which falls on the first week of June. The government decided to make this an annual event in 1990. Different activities, such as singing, dancing, public speaking, competitions among schools, panel discussions over the radio, village cleaning competitions, sporting events are held throughout the islands with prizes donated by public institutions and private firms. Organized by a national committee, the event is an awareness and educational effort which has brought about a great public awareness and information dissemination. A national environment plan is being implemented and related legislations are expected to be submitted for approval through the official channel this year.
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**Media Reporting**

The media in Tonga has played a significant role in keeping the public informed and making them aware of environmental problems and the efforts by government and other interested organizations to handle these problems.

The media has not only kept the public updated with the latest reports on global warming and how many nuclear tests conducted each year in French Polynesia but also revealed certain actions by some influential people and those in authority to introduce projects that might have caused more harm to the environment.

For example, five years ago, an expatriate teamed up with local partners, including the king's daughter to establish an incineration for hazardous wastes that would have been imported from other countries, especially the United States. Because of media exposure and the decisions of interested parties, the project was withdrawn.

More recently, our king had talks with some interested parties in one US state about bringing all the old tyres from that particular state to be burned in Tonga, for a certain fee. The local media took up the story and the public was well informed. Nothing has been heard since of the tyre-burning project.

The greatest challenge for the media is to continuously bring the environmental stories in ways that will still maintain the interest and to spur action. Some of the news people often fall into "sensationalism" and "sensationalism." That is needed is more authoritative literature and resource personnel on the environment, and regular training for investigative and in-depth reporting.

Tonga is a signatory to many regional and international conventions on the environment. But the lack of structure and resources hampers its efforts. However, assistance from regional environmental bodies, such as the South Pacific Environmental Programme, and the United Nations Environmental Programme, and other such organizations have helped to alleviate the many problems Tonga is facing as part of the world community.