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Paper From Western Samoa

By

Uelese Petaia
INTRODUCTION

In the past we have lived off the land without much concern about it's welfare and how it affects our lives, if it is not looked after.

We have been living off the land but we have not taken any steps to help protect it for future generations of Samoans.

Not that planting and fishing caused much detriment to the environment. In the past there was no real threat to our environment. The main reason being that we had no developmental programmes in place for a long time and all we had was agricultural products to sell.

After the country became independent in 1962, and had to fare on it's own, there was a move towards establishing developmental programmes and industries other than agricultural ones, started being introduced. While I do not believe that this was the only reason for an increase in environmental deterioration in Western Samoa, it is a major contributor.

Agriculture has become a contributor too. As government strived to increase agricultural export earnings, agricultural chemicals, particularly pesticides, have been brought in to boost production, but with very little concern over the effects on the environment.

Economic development has brought with it environmental hazards and it may be some time before some balance is found there.

The gradual dependence on imported goods has brought with it some products detrimental to the environment but it has been hard to educate the people on the effects of these products.

The continuing French nuclear tests in our part of the world has not helped our environment either.

As our people, and in particular our leaders, have become aware of the problems facing the environment, and ultimately ourselves, I must admit that our
government has moved swiftly to prevent further adverse environmental conditions.

**POLICIES**

Only a couple of years back, our government introduced an Environmental Protection Bill into Parliament and what was once the Lands and Survey department is now the *Lands and Environment* department. The present government has vowed to help protect the environment and is clearly working along those lines. But sometimes finding a balance between want and need causes problems.

Government has said that they plan to look at environmental effects of all new industries to be based in the country before issuing licenses. It has also shown it's willingness to support regional efforts by allowing the *South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP)* to be based in Apia.

The new Environmental division of the Lands and Environment department sponsors an Environmental Page in the *Samoa Observer* three times a week. This is run in both Samoan and English languages.

Logging, a major detriment to the environment has been curtailed, slightly, by the government.

Some big overseas environmental organisations have been instrumental also in pushing some villages to ban logging of their forests. Villages had suddenly found that ready cash for village development of education and health facilities was right there in their forests, and logging companies, interested only in fast cash returns, were quick to take advantage of the peoples needs. But more often than not the returns the villages were getting from the companies were less than inadequate.

Companies seeking to log forests would turn up in the villages with offers to build new school buildings in return for logging the forest. These schools in the end cost only a minor percentage of the returns these companies were getting out of the forest. The schools went up as promised, but in the recent two cyclones that hit our country in less than 2 years, most of them were the first buildings to fly away with the winds leaving the villages without forests and schools.

Government has moved into this area and in the Bill passed in Parliament, designated some of these forests as protected and banning the logging of them.

One other part of development that is at the moment causing great concern on the environmental protection front is in hydro electricity. There is one major hydro project on now that in my opinion needed to have had a more in depth environmental impact study. It is a major cause of concern for people living in the area. With more such developmental programmes on the horizon, more work
must be done in ensuring a more stringent environmental impact study is carried out before these projects can get the go ahead.

The education programme being carried out by the Department of Lands and Environment in my opinion is doing its job in informing the population of the hazards to their lives if the environment is not protected, but whether it is doing it effectively remains to be seen.

The most important area where environmental education is happening is in schools. These future leaders of the country will be able to make the decisions on environmental matters, with clear understanding of them, because of this early education. They are also doing an effective job now when they return to their families and villages in making them aware of environmental issues.

Apart from using schools, the department runs paid newspaper columns in both languages, although it is only done with the Samoa Observer. As it gets funding for this important part of their programme I believe they should be looking at other newspapers in the country as well. But the newspapers only reach a very small percentage of the population for these to be as effective as they can be. They also have regular educational programmes on the National Radio station which covers the whole country. These can have a lot more effect but the programmes need to be presented more professionally and in a more interesting way.

A couple of years ago a Non-governmental Organisation was formed by people concerned about the protection of the environment in Western Samoa. More Samoans need to become involved in this organisation. With time and hard work this organisation, O LE SIOSIOMAGA O SAMOA, will become an important part of the environmental education programme in the country.

In terms of environmental protection, Western Samoa is very new and needs all the help it can get.

Of course apart from human induced problems to the environment, we have a more stronger force that we have had to live with all our lives. This has been major cyclones and hurricanes.

In the past two years we have been hit very badly by two cyclones, OFA and VAL, and the damage caused to the environment has been worse than anything one can think of.

The recent cyclone VAL that hit us December 1991, has destroyed most of our forests and it will be some years before any real growth to the environment can be seen.

**MEDIA REPORTING**
As far as I am aware this is the first time that the Western Samoan media has been invited to a seminar-workshop on the environment. We too in the media are very new to the topic of environmental protection. Most newspapers have no policies on environmental reporting. What we do is report on any matters that arise but we have certainly not shown any firm commitment to the issue, not from a lack of want but more from a lack of education on the issues and mainly the restrictive costs of running newspapers.

Most newspapers in our country are small and this in my opinion is the major problem. Because of the lack of properly trained staff and the high cost of running newspapers in general there are no sections where different topics like environmental issues can be dealt with adequately.

From experience, when issues arise involving the environment then we get involved and I sometimes feel like we are only paying lip service to the issue. The Samoa Observer runs the only environmental column but I do not know if it would be run regularly if it was not paid for. This is a direct effect of the high costs of running newspapers in our country and certainly not a reflection on the newspaper's management.

I believe that this an area where government and newspapers need to work together and formulate policies to help the effective education of people on environmental issues.

A simple way of doing this is for government to offer incentives to newspapers who formulates and operates policies on the environment. Environmentally safe chemicals, inks and newsprint (recycled) could be used if government offered enough incentives.

At present government has a 42% customs duty on newsprint and some 45% excise tax on top of that. All other printing material like ink and chemicals, plates etc, carry a 42% customs duty and a further 45% excise tax. These restrictive costs are detrimental to the effective running of newspapers. The circulations are very low. The Samoa Observer has a circulation of 3000 and the rest of the newspapers range from 1200 to 250. These certainly do not ensure that the whole of the country is covered by the newspapers. The total population is now 159,000. The literacy rate is 95%.

Given the above reasons one can see quite clearly one of the major hurdles newspapers have to deal with first in order to effectively introduce some kind of policies, like an environmental policy, which would include the running of regular educational features and columns.

In Western Samoa we have a journalists association called Journalists Association of Western Samoa (JAWS) and I believe that as we begin to organise ourselves we can become a good springboard for ensuring that newspaper costs are lowered, but at present we are in the teething stages and as we learn how to bite we will obviously move in this area. I live in hope that we do not take forever in the teething stages so we can move in a positive direction, environmentally.