

Resource Management under Traditional Tenure: The Political Ecology of a Contemporary Problem, New Georgia Islands, Solomon Islands

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Abstract

High rates of population growth, increased competition for access to resources, growing strains on traditional tenure systems and the wish to improve standards of living combine to threaten the tenor of everyday life. The need to maintain the environment, a reliable supply of food for domestic consumption and a continuing flow of cash income makes it necessary to plan for a better future.

Largely because people cannot agree on how to resolve tenure problems their ability to manage resources is limited. Oral rules and histories which provide the basis of tenurial rights to land and reefs are often confused and easily manipulated. Customary modes of conflict resolution are not strong enough to settle matters under dispute. Solutions imposed by the courts are frequently subject to appeal resulting in continuing litigation and mounting frustration.

Is there a way out? In this paper it is argued that communities have all the capabilities required to find their own solutions. Decision making can be assisted by outsiders working as catalysts. Researchers working with tenure holders on resource problems can help assemble information for immediate feedback into communities which can help people make better decisions about planning for sustainable development.

Key words: Resource management, Population pressure, Land and marine tenure, Conflict resolution, Sustainable development, Participatory research.

Introduction

Resource management is a term which refers to the way in which natural resources are looked after. A resource management system refers to a specific way in which this might be done. In the Western Solomons resources are managed by those who hold tenurial rights of usufruct over both land and lagoons. As long as customary tenure works then it is clear who must take responsibility for resource management: the resource holders.

Where tenure holders lose confidence in their ability to manage resources and the rules of customary tenure do not provide enough guidance to decide differences of opinion about

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land and fishing rights between holders then more and more matters under dispute are referred to the court, the court becomes overloaded, decisions are increasingly delayed and the whole system begins to falter.

Everywhere customary tenure is under pressure. There are more people than ever before and therefore a greater need to manage resources well. As the ratio between population and land deteriorates the chances of getting community agreement on what is best for a community as a whole tends to give way to individual holders pursuing their own exclusive interests. A situation is reached in which there is less likelihood of community agreement, more likelihood of disagreement and more disputes for an already overloaded court.

The purpose of this paper is to answer the questions: What is the nature of the problem? How did the current impasse come about? What was recommended in the past? What can we learn from case studies? and, What can be done?

The Nature of the Problem

Between 1976–86 the population of the Solomon Islands increased annually at a rate of 3.5 per cent. This is very high. Some 47.5 per cent of the population is under the age of 15 and nearly 5 per cent 60 years of age or over. There is a high dependency ratio of workers to dependents. The potential for continuing high growth is assured. Even if an effective family planning programme was introduced it would be many years before growth could be slowed. A greatly increased demand on resources can be expected.

The two areas in which I have focused my fieldwork reflect the national pattern:

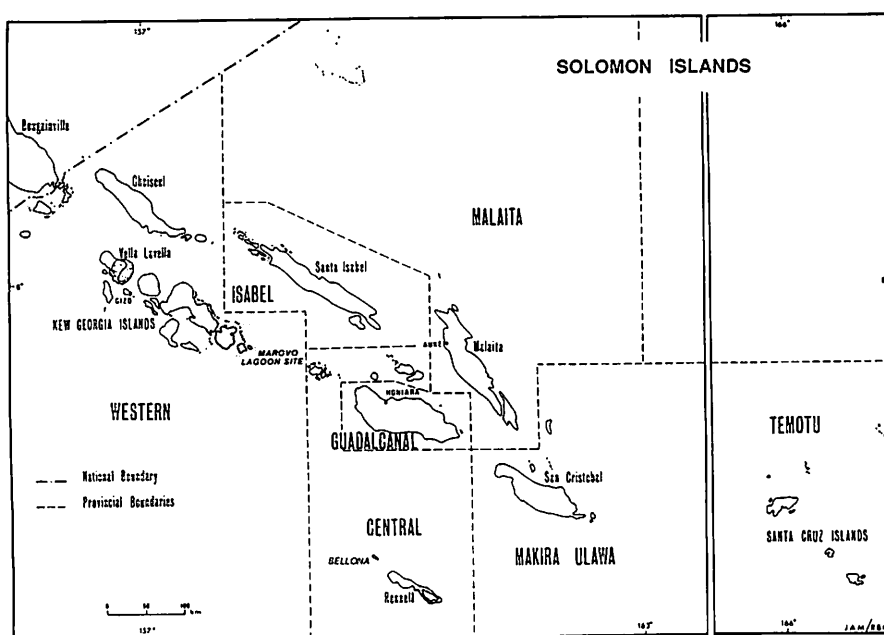


Fig. 1.

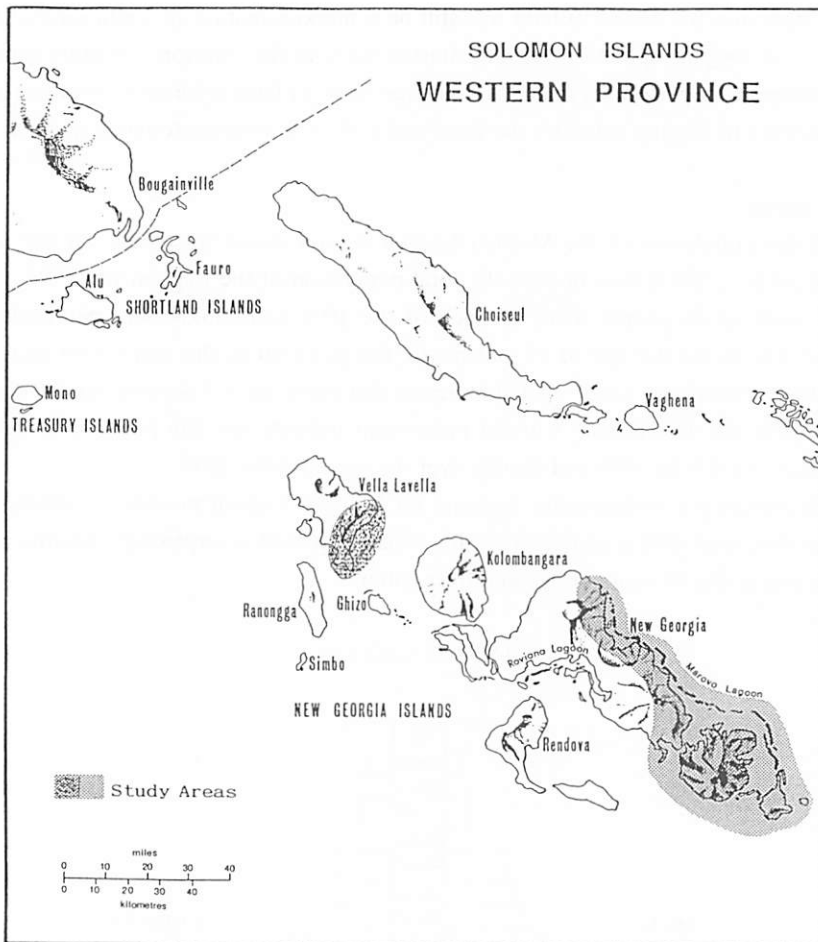


Fig. 2.

Vella Lavella

The population of Vella Lavella has doubled over the past 15 years from 3,765 in 1970 to 6,827 in 1986 and can be expected to double again before the year 2000.

The implications of this are clear. People will have to settle back from the coast on steeper slopes of the interior. If they plant economic crops they will require roads to take produce out. As it will not be possible to maintain land under cultivation for as long more land will be cleared per person to meet food needs. More disturbance of the surface will mean more displacement of soil. More people in the headwaters of streams which currently provide potable water for downstream settlements means that water is more likely to become contaminated. The lowering of the vegetation canopy will reduce the biomass and when this is felled, the availability of nutrients to cultivated plants, reduce yields and overall productivity per hectare is likely to fall.

The situation warrants that careful attention be paid to management. If a stable state is maintained and work in gardens continues to provide the larger proportion of domestic food

needs, competition for access to land will still be a marked feature of Vella Lavella by the year 2000. A logging operation recently started work in the interior. If more influential Mbilua lineage leaders (*lekasa*) open their lineage (*toutou*) land holdings or estates (*qoqono* or *nggonggono*) to logging activities the man:land ratio will deteriorate much quicker.

Marovo Lagoon

In 1986 the population of the Marovo Lagoon Area Council was 6616. If the Kolom-baghea Ward is included then in 1986 the total population of the Lagoon was 7793. There were just over seven people living in each of the 1094 households, 46.5 per cent of the population was under the age of 15 and nearly five per cent in the cohorts 60 and above. The resulting dependency ratio¹⁾ of 110 indicates that there are 1.1 dependents for every 1.0 active adults in the workforce. Current projections indicate that the population will reach approximately 11,000 by 1996 and double over the period 1986–2000.

Figure 3 depicting a demographic pyramid for Marovo Lagoon provides a picture of the population dynamics with a characteristically broad base and a surprisingly healthy proportion of people in the 70 years of age and over cohort.

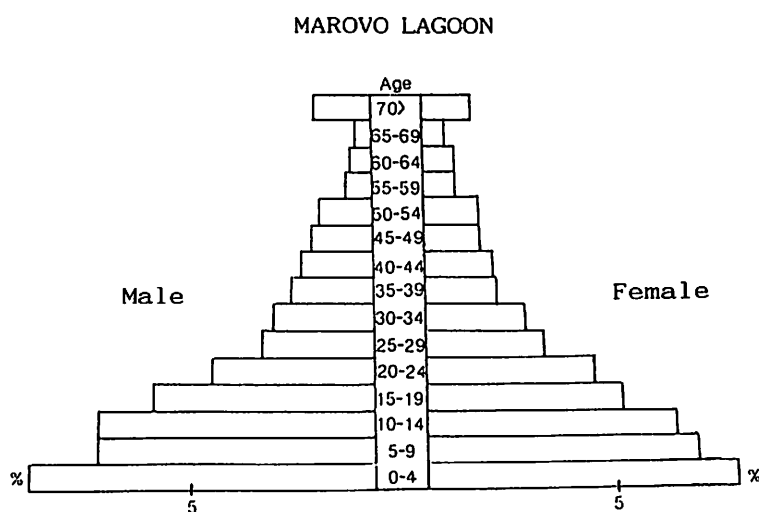


Fig. 3.

Figure 4 (p. 99) maps the distribution of the largest concentrations of population which lie in the south on the north coast of Vangunu. Nearly 45 per cent of inhabited sites are relatively small and have a population of between 1–14 people. Most people live in communities with populations exceeding 100.

Observations made for Vella Lavella can be made for Marovo but here it is the lagoon and reefs as much as the land which form the principal economic focus²⁾.

The high islands which form the main land mass are largely covered with tropical rainforest. High precipitation (3–4,000 mm/annum) here as on Vella Lavella ensures rapid run-off over exposed, relatively soft ground, the transport of sediments and silting of

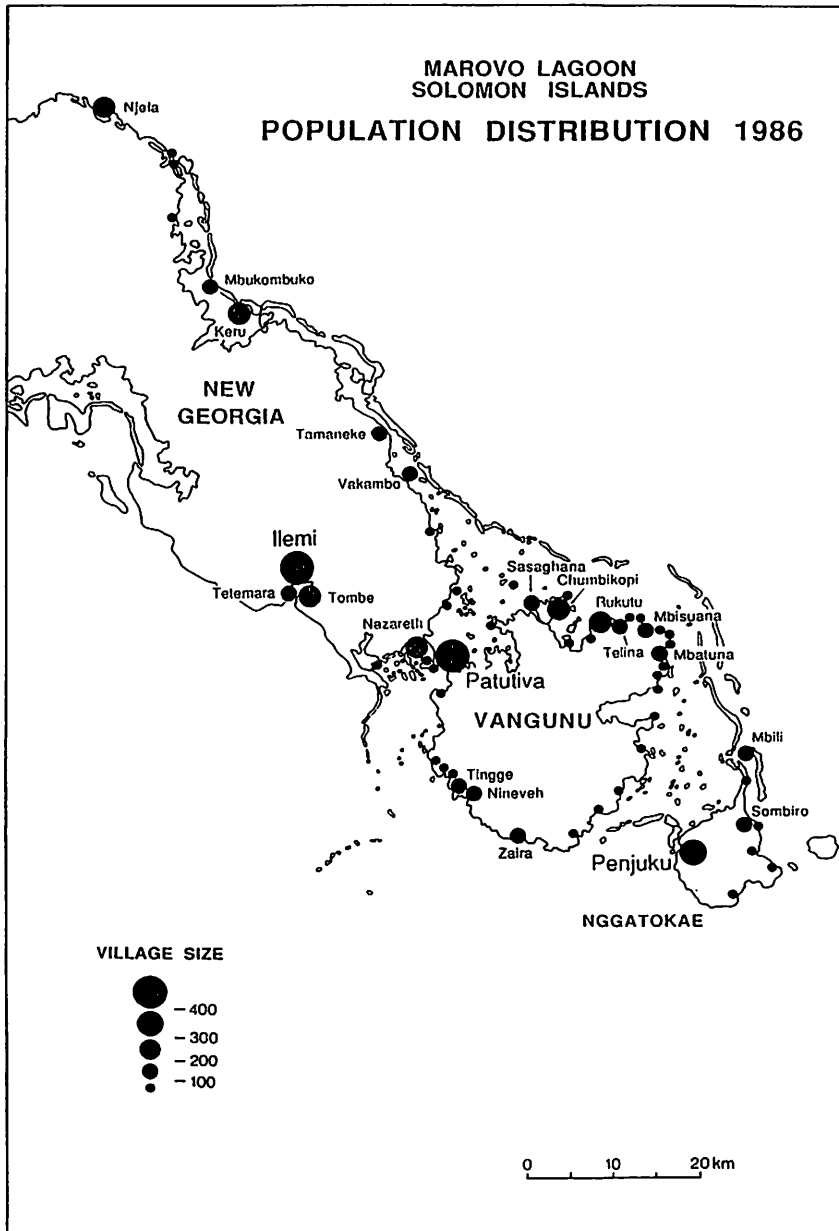


Fig. 4.

mangrove estuaries. Any damage to mangroves adversely affects the ecological system of the lagoon and reduces fish populations.

Added pressures on the environment include various commercial enterprises.

Fishing The lagoon is an important source of bait fish for the skipjack tuna fishing industry. Over the past few years up to a third of the Solomon Islands total export earnings have come

from fishing. According to the **1986 Population Census** at times fish products make up more than half the value of all exports (Solomon Islands Government, 1989: 205). Not only is it important to the nation, marine tenure holders are paid according to the number of nights spent fishing by the commercial boats. Although this is carefully monitored by the government's Fisheries Division as most of the fishing is carried out at night it is difficult to estimate exactly which lineage's (*butubutu*) territory (*puava*) is being used.

This clumsy arrangement contributes little to community harmony. According to HVIDING, at times when agreement can not be reached,

Bait ground arrangements create friction, strife and disputes between fellow *butubutu* members, between "brothers", it is said... having disputes within the *butubutu* is seen as disgraceful and disruptive...

(Some prefer) to keep the tuna boats out and manage without royalty money...

(Besides) Taking huge volumes of bait fish is bound to have some negative consequences for important food stocks in the lagoon (HVIDING, 1988: 62).

A SOPACOAST³⁾ report is more cautious but makes the same point,

The frequency and intensity of "bait ground" disputes is expected to intensify as pressures on lagoon fish stocks continue to increase. Rightly or wrongly, exploitation of bait fish stocks is perceived by many residents to be a primary cause of depletion in other fish stocks (SOPACOAST, 1986: 11)

Other commercial use is made of the lagoon. Marine tenure holders dive for brownlip, blacklip and trochus shells, beche-de-mer, black coral and infrequent small scale commercial fishing where the catch is placed on ice in portable coolers⁴⁾.

Timber Timber has also been taken from clear fell operations in the area now reforested (Viru Harbour) and a timber mill operates at the Seventh Day Adventist Mission station of Mbatuna. Land holders are limited in what they can take both by law (from felling trees further than a mile from the coast) and by the availability of equipment (eg. winches and barges) which effectively restricts them to felling buoyant, lighter wood.

Mining New Georgia is part of the same geological formation as Bougainville (Fig. 1). Traces of gold have been found. Both Utah Mining (USA) and Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA) looked at government survey material assembled in the 1960s and at the time decided against carrying out serious prospecting. Recently BHP (Broken Hill Propriety) of Australia were exploring the possibility of making a careful assay of ore bearing rocks in the Kolombangha Ward. Before such permission is granted by the government it must be approved by local land holders. The whole question of who has authority to speak and for whom quickly became an issue. With the example of what had happened in Bougainville everybody engaged was particularly careful⁵⁾.

Overview Figure 5 (p. 101) provides a graphic image of what is happening in the relationship between the amount of land (or resources) available per person within the context of the total population. As the population increases and the need for land grows the amount of

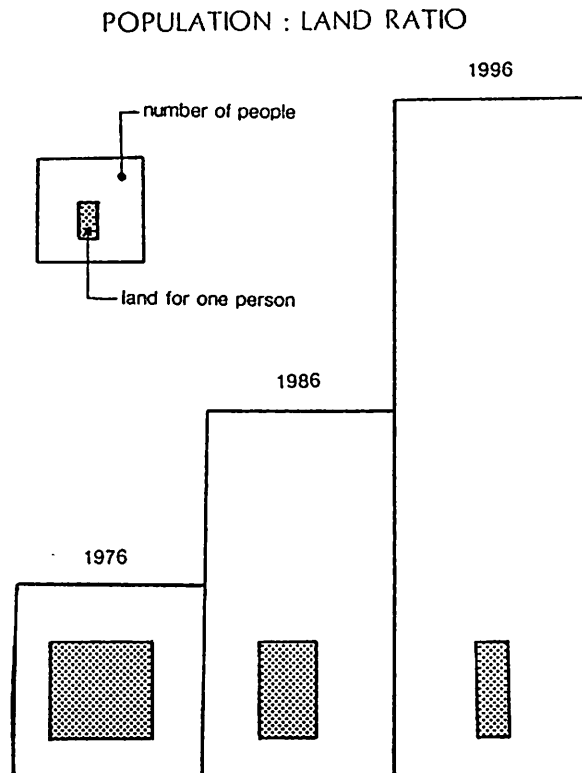


Fig. 5.

land available per person declines. It is axiomatic that as the man:resource ratio deteriorates increased competition for resources will occur.

It would misrepresent the facts to present an alarmist case⁶. My purpose is to illustrate the nature of the problem. It is my belief that basic questions of land and marine tenure form the biggest obstacle to sensible long term resource management and that the basic conflicts emerging between population and resources, exploitation of commercial resources against conservation, monetary gain and purchase of food needs against subsistence production cannot be resolved as long as the matter is tied to concrete issues, claims under dispute.

This impasse is dangerous. As long as the matter remains confused resource management will remain a matter of chance. The quick and the cunning take advantage of disorder to enhance their own position at the expense of the community as a whole. In the course of interviews carried out in 1990 the potential for outstanding disagreements to generate mischief was pointed out in quite strong terms by several senior civil servants. Assault associated with drunkenness revealed that disputes over land provided the rationale for attack.

In these societies committed to an egalitarian order the emergence of a few wealthy people is not just a matter of jealousy and envy: those who make money from community resources can only become markedly better off than others by taking for themselves what should be shared. Where resources are owned in common one person can only advance his interests at

the expense of others. Nowhere is it more true that all property is theft. In the past for this self enrichment to be acceptable those big men who did the taking had to appear to be giving as much, if not more back than they took. Although they enjoyed greater repute and status they could only maintain this if they held to strong redistribution obligations. As long as they did this they could make arrangements without arousing suspicion. Even if they were quick and cunning they could get away with it because they had to share.

Today there is no medium which allows for direct sharing to enhance one's status. This can only be done indirectly by giving to the church and accepting a considerably muted reward as long as you live and playing off against a considerably better, if nebulous, future after death. This giving is nothing in the absence of moral and spiritual values which in themselves down play the significance of material success and the accumulation of wealth. Further to the matter, good Christians are inclined to dismiss the necessity to consider problems of tenure because they are disputatious, worldly and therefore unworthy of consideration. The land, reefs and lagoons belong to God and remain after individual users depart this earthly life.

Whatever WEBER (1930) had to say about the positive role of the Protestant Ethic in the rise of capitalism is certainly not evident here. This anticipates the next question.

How Did the Current Impasse Come about?

The system that worked before contact was adequate to serve a society that was not so much short of resources as people to make use of them. A variety of logical systems of customary tenure gave primary access to specific lineages who were considered to belong to the place by historical precedence and secondary access to those who did not belong to these original lineages but who were nevertheless accepted as members of the community. As there was a constant shortage of labour the critical matter was not the rules under which access was granted but how many people a community could muster to support biological and social reproduction and not only ensure political survival but further their repute.

Contact with the outside world introduced the completely alien idea of tenure, that of ownership under which title to land granted exclusive right of possession to individual owners who could dispose of and transfer this title as they wished. Approximately 11 per cent of the total land area of the Solomons was alienated initially to foreigners. In the Western Province more land was alienated than anywhere else, just over 40 per cent of the national total. The introduction of ownership passed without incident. The immediate benefit of securing a resident trader was the overriding, immediate objective. Later when the colonial government declared large tracts of land to be "waste land" and made this land available to plantation interests the consequences of the original error became clear. Very quickly Solomon Islanders learned they had to contest the legitimacy of transactions.

When indigenous writers stress a deep sense of frustration over the current impasse they are apt to argue that the colonial authorities created the problem by introducing alien ideas of legality, individual ownership which undermined indigenous ways of dealing with land

problems. As one writer declares "Land disputes (are) not customary...(they) are recent developments and are the direct result of outside influences as well as interference with local cultures" (MAENU'U, 1985a: 19).

This view must be taken seriously but beyond stating quite correctly that interference was uninvited, unwelcome and damaging it does not bring us closer to a solution. The changes introduced were not part of a conspiracy to dispossess Solomon Islanders but part of the imperial expansion of nineteenth century industrial capitalism that shaped the twentieth century. This was not a supermarket option for any of the participants, be they servants, recipients or victims: there was no choice. Colonial intervention and subsequent independence imposed a comparatively rigid hierarchical state structure as well as legal and administrative procedures on top of a highly fluid and egalitarian system. For very good reasons people are reluctant to fully accept this bureaucratic culture into their understanding of the world even though other post industrial, consumer society ideas and preferences about a variety of things have found a place in their daily lives.

It is as much the co-existence of these two legacies, on one hand the flexible, holistic, traditional management and on the other the rigid, reductionist, legalistic bureaucratic structure of the modern state which has generated the current confusion but here again structural analysis only helps to better define the problem rather than suggest a way out. It points out that this dual legacy offers alternative solutions neither of which holds up easily when faced with the other. For example to promote custom solutions for situations that people did not face in customary times or impose administrative or legal instructions on matters that are considered as belonging to the family, lineage or the like lends itself to misunderstandings if not further bewilderment and hostility.

For this reason the attempt to equate guidelines in customary tenure as rules and "law" and therefore worthy of equal dignity and authority as the law is misplaced because it imposes an inappropriate understanding and expectation and gets us nowhere: it remains within the matrix that produced the original problem. The belief that disputes should be referred to the land court expresses a faith in state authority and procedures which already can not live up to expectations.

To confuse the two legacies simply by translating English terms and applying them to customary practices reveals a wish to dismiss the problem rather than solve it. For instance commentators can not, without doing some damage to history, call traditional management of land and marine resources a system of "tribal administration" (MAENU'U, 1985a: 18). There were rules about what could be done, where and when and by whom but these were not regulations that had to be critically examined by committees and redrafted with the help of lawyers. Where there were gaps in local knowledge, disputes could arise and situations manipulated to provide a reason for disagreement and where these could not be resolved by general consensus the sheer political will and charisma of big men could be called into play and if necessary the threat of violence or overt force used to settle the matter.

But statements like this in turn do damage to history. Leonard P. MAENU'U is correct when he implies that land disputes were not a big issue in the past. Other matters took priority. In the New Georgia Islands resources other than land provided an early source of

conflict.

Genesis of the Problem

Resource management in the Solomon Islands was, until Europeans arrived first to trade, later to settle in small numbers and then to establish a colonial government, a matter which lay entirely within the orbit of indigenous beliefs. The manner in which management was arranged was indistinguishable from the total body of culture and customary beliefs and the nature of the social structure. Management was primarily aimed at securing a livelihood, ensuring successful reproduction and survival of the immediate community and matters relating to its identity.

This largely self contained system was broken open to outside influence by the arrival of Europeans. From the very start the visitors traded things like iron for supplies of fresh food and water. Long before missionaries and colonial administrators came sailing over the horizon contact had introduced fundamental changes (McKINNON, 1993).

Solomon Islands society appears to have been a resource surplus environment in which population numbers, owing as much to endemic malaria and high mortality rates had not built up large populations. In the Western Province early visitors were as likely to be greeted by hostile armed men (BOUGAINVILLE, 1772: 319–320) as those who appeared to be friendly (JACK-HINTON, 1969: 289). People were mobile, armed, decorated and their land was mostly heavily wooded. These were stone age people who had had little significant impact on their moist, maritime, tropical environment.

In such a society there was not a strong need for resource management as we might understand the term today but there was nevertheless a definite shape to land use and tenure which on Vella Lavella was organised by the lineage or *toutou* called the *butubutu* in the Marovo Lagoon (HVIDING, 1988). Lineage symbols, both plants and animals, were sacred and could not be harmed, in areas close to the shrines (*sope*) in which the skulls of ancestors were kept behaviour was strictly circumscribed and vegetation could not be felled.

When Europeans first arrived in the New Georgia Islands they became a resource which if properly managed could make a great difference to the people with whom they traded. As I have argued elsewhere (McKINNON, 1975) iron gave those who were fortunate enough to get hold of it a distinct advantage in producing food, making customary money (*takula*), getting their way with traditional opponents, taking heads and capturing slaves. A system of circular causation developed under which tomahawks came to be highly valued to make war. Traders anxious to do business knew that they could get what they wanted as long as they had tomahawks to exchange for whatever product they preferred. While tortoiseshell was in high demand in the China trade then Western Solomon Islanders were encouraged to obtain shell in exchange for tomahawks. Raiders then made war on those who controlled turtle grounds and collected turtles, heads and slaves. Those who could control as many of the factors within the system did better than the rest and so it went. When they got old enough men taken as slaves in their childhood were put on ships for a fee and eventually returned speaking Pijin or English. They were in a strong position to manage things and emerged as powerful big men in increasingly confident, expansive communities with complex interlocking

leadership which on Vella Lavella consisted of big men (*raokoraeko*) priests (*siam*), lineage leaders (*lekasa*) and war leaders. As trade developed and guns became available, as Europeans settled and land became a factor then these all became negotiable commodities in a very dynamic system.

The momentum of the system built up from the early 1800s but by the end of the century inherent contradictions within and opposition outside worked against its survival. To maintain repute big men had to demonstrate a constant willingness to wage war to collect heads. As Europeans settled, trade required peace. When Europeans became embroiled and died reprisals by British warships caused a great deal of damage. Missionaries were a different type of settler altogether. When a government was established and declared a policy of pacification it was only a matter of time before the more violent aspects of circular causation were repressed and the whole system lost momentum.

In the period of missionisation which followed, powerful big men disappeared. Those who in an earlier period might have made their mark as war leaders armed with tomahawk and Snider rifles became catechists armed only with rhetoric and righteousness. They no longer commanded the sort of followings and authority firmly founded in material resources and independent power. The paternalism of the Methodist Mission combined with the authoritarian superiority of the colonial administration undermined independence and the presence of so many politically privileged small European traders made it virtually impossible for Solomon Islanders to compete. A pacified dependent people taught to be ashamed of their vibrant and violent past eschewed the aggression necessary to overcome the obstacles placed in the path of indigenous traders.

It is out of the confusion of this warring period that land deals were struck by big men who often had no real lineage authority on which to make decisions. Many of the original "titles"⁷⁾ under which small holdings were alienated from customary tenure were arranged for white traders by big men and witnessed by the captains of trading vessels. The most valuable commercial land suitable for coconut plantations was on the coast and during raiding days it was safer for Solomon Islanders to stay well back on high land. By the time peace was established and copra was already a valuable commodity most of the best anchorages like Liapari in the south of Mbilua had been alienated along with much of the good land. Huge blocks of land unoccupied but nevertheless known by Solomon Islanders to be part of local lineage estates were declared "waste land", taken by the government and subsequently released to planters. Most of Gizo and Kolombangara were lost to local farmers in this way.

The rise of copra, the loss of both land and confidence, the acceptance of Christianity, the establishment of white planter/traders as settlers, the imposition of a hierarchical system of colonial administration which established a privileged position for all Europeans, a system which the mission fostered along with paternalism was not a fatal impact but was certainly traumatic. Traumatic in a very fundamental way. The loss of morale, the introduction of new diseases and the rapid fall in population⁸⁾ added up to a loss of political power and a subdued leadership that referred all important issues to colonial outsiders, mostly missionaries but also to a lesser extent colonial officers and traders. The adoption of a new universal morality, medicine and education implicitly diminished the significance of much of what was

specifically local, ranging from god-like ancestors to esoteric indigenous knowledge. As a researcher with a strong interest in history and the old ways I often met with what was not so much a reluctance to talk about the past known to grandparents but a deeper sense of cultural amnesia.

Because most of the brighter children were taken out of their home villages for long periods to undergo mission education much traditional knowledge was lost. Those who like Gideon TOLAPITU of Maravari, Silas ETO of Kolombaghea and others who became important in both church life and maintaining custom were unusual. Most of the rising stars were promoted by missionaries and as long as their charismatic presence served the mission all was well. In fact their position was always insecure. In the early years as "natives" in a hierarchy run by expatriates serious deviations from the revealed truth of the "masters" could not be countenanced and offenders were simply assigned to positions of less authority or forced to resign. Until Silas ETO, in the sunset days of the Methodist Mission managed to take his followers into a new church, loss of position within the mission hierarchy usually meant the end to an otherwise promising career. There was no solid ground on which potential big men could build their power base within the new political, administrative and church structure. The Methodist Mission like the Communist Party in the USSR and Eastern Europe so deeply challenged the cultural underpinnings of affective behaviour and independence of the people they ruled that people were unable to pursue activities based on their own informed judgement.

The decline of traditional knowledge, the loss of leaders with an independent power base, the replacement of indigenous institutions of village autonomy and self government, the new focus on obtaining land on which to establish plantations to generate a cash income all brought into being a completely new situation. The old ways were not up to dealing with them but rather than being encouraged to find new ways out of the impasse experts were called in to do it for them.

What Was Recommended in the Past?

Throughout the early part of the twentieth century a growing number of complaints were lodged with the government concerning some of the titles under which land had been alienated. As it was not until 1912 that the government was made the sole legal purchaser of land there had been plenty of time for a lot of informal arrangements to go sour. Even the government was not free of the charge of mismanagement, as BENNETT notes "There is little evidence to show that ... the government's role (was) one of honest broker" (BENNETT, 1987: 148). The largest claims challenged were taken by the government under the Waste Land Regulations⁹ (1900, 1901 and 1904). Enough other complaints were lodged to justify setting up a Land Commission. Work commenced in 1919 and continued to 1924 under the direction of Judge F. B. PHILLIPS.

PHILLIPS recorded a great deal of information about land tenure and made some attempt to codify the rules under which access was normally gained. The application of a legal mind is

evident but as suggested above the need for order does not always ensure a practical outcome.

It was not until after the war that the second official attempt was made to systematically explore customary land tenure. This work was completed in 1957 with publication of C. H. ALLEN's *Customary Land Tenure in the British Solomon Islands*. Underlying the approach is the call to clarify the rules which apply so that British colonial officials could better manage the business of Land Courts.

SCHEFFLER was the first qualified anthropologist to take a critical look at land tenure and twenty years ago pointed out that referring issues to the land court rarely provides a solution.

... people often refuse to accept their judgements and appeal cases over and over again. The courts frequently fail to act decisively or are not backed up by external authority when they do reach positive decisions. For lack of trust (and sometimes dishonesty) many disputes do not reach the courts and the principals manage by one means or another to prevent the use of disputed lands (SCHEFFLER, 1971: 289)

He recommended that the government avoid interfering in disputes and imposing decisions because,

the local people are better equipped to deal with and should be encouraged to work out for themselves. But here they would be helped by advice, and studies of their problems, which they do not fully understand, would be useful (SCHEFFLER, 1971: 289)

In the light of events which have followed his conclusion is much too conservative.

the courts need considerably more support for their decisions if they are to become the effective legal bodies on the local scene (SCHEFFLER, 1971: 289).

Since SCHEFFLER made his recommendation the courts have become bogged down by a plethora of cases. Plaintiffs dissatisfied with the outcome of a lower court hearing can have it referred to the high court where it must be held in a long line awaiting consideration.

The problem is not so much the fault of the courts but that so many cases are referred in the first place. The most urgent task required is the clarification of land and tenure arrangements by the lineage members themselves not under pressure to provide a judgement on specific cases but in the leisure of clearheaded reflection. A fully codified system would emphasise the current unsatisfactory state of affairs without easing demand. Encouraging lineage organisations to take more responsibility and consult with the elders of other lineages represented in the community has much to recommend it.

This raises a host of other questions that need to be answered. If the situation is as I have described it why have such committees not been set up in the past? Why do locally elected Area councils not work to set up and support such organisations?

The issue as I understand it is not so much a reductionist problem of writing land and marine tenure into law in which people can look for their own advantage but what is best for the community as a whole. Tenure is a problem but it is only one aspect of the broader

question of resource management. As long as resource holders are primarily concerned with getting as much for themselves regardless of the consequences what can we expect for optimising long term use of resources and sustainable development? Better resource management should be the aim of solving the tenure problem rather than facilitating the access of resources of a few.

What Can We Learn from Case Studies?

In the past community leaders, big men, lineage chiefs and priests played an important part in guiding and ordering daily life. Within the egalitarian tradition authority depended on repute and was a personal achievement rather than a procedural promotion, a status ascribed by the social structure.

In the early days of contact raiding, trading and the acquisition of arms generated conditions which provided opportunities for men of ability to achieve prowess. The colonial and mission peace that followed displaced the big man of independent means and made him a servant of the church, a position within a notional hierarchy that placed greater emphasis on conformity, education and advancement by promotion decided by outsiders. In a new age of farmers where everybody made a living in much the same way, where access to land and marine resources under the control of individuals counted for more than ever before, the communities turned in on themselves. The lack of an institutionalised capacity to deal with the problems of tenure and in the absence of any good reason other than personal interest to change this it was natural for people to refer cases to the courts and outsiders.

Communities became dependent on the coalescence of interests embedded in the colonial hierarchy, preoccupied with disputes that they were happy to refer to others and complain about rather than resolve for themselves. When we look at individual case studies it is easier to see the nature of the problem.

Mbilua Coast Study¹⁰⁾

The people of Vella Lavella consider themselves to belong to a "bush" tradition. This did not prevent them from becoming extremely active as canoe borne raiders and head hunters in the nineteenth century. Just as they defy easy categorisation as a bush people so does their system of customary land tenure not lend itself to easy codification. In the past the boundaries of estates were not clearly defined and although there are lucid general principles the exceptions seem to figure more strongly than the rules. Land holders were always amenable to pragmatic political interference.

Under traditional arrangements land is divided into *toutou* estates called *qoqono* or *nggonggono*. The ill defined boundaries roughly followed natural features such as the crests of hills, line of the coast, rivers and streams, rocky or fossil coral outcrops and even large trees. Boundaries were indicative rather than specific. It was Europeans who demanded that boundaries be identified. Before land became an issue the *qoqono* was more a home area, a place where a certain string of related hamlets lived scattered through the forest.

These people claimed the *qoqono* as home, part of their identity.

Claims to rights of usufruct are now justified in principle on the basis of who first settled the land. This poses a challenge. The whole southeast section of Vella Lavella, an area of approximately 50–60 km² is said to have been occupied by the Miqa and Kutakobai *toutou* both of which died out sometime ago. All of the current land holders are therefore strictly speaking secondary rather than primary right holders. How to set precedence between them is extremely difficult. How a particular lineage came to be settled on the land is more often the stuff of legend than history. The two can not be separated and their authority often depends as much on who tells the story rather than if it can be independently verified.

A typical example is provided by the Sorezaru lineage. The story as told in the field in 1969 was exactly the same as that recorded by a District Officer reporting to the Resident Commissioner and enclosed in papers concerning a land claim examined by Judge PHILLIPS. Forced to abandon its original estate in the northwest of Vella Lavella members of the *toutou* took up residence in the Malasova catchment. To secure the right to occupy the land in perpetuity (PHILLIPS, 1919–24) they held five feasts and made appropriate gifts of pigs and shell money.

Where formal feasts and the exchange of gifts is not reported occupying groups, often strangers such as war captives and impoverished refugees worked the land in return for the payment of first fruit to the lineage elder chief or head, the *lekasa*. This signified some degree of subordination but within a generation or two these people were able to strengthen their claims by marriage into the dominant *toutou*. The Sabe *toutou* of Maravari claims land by this means. But this tale of subordination is contradicted by a more pragmatic claim to authority,

cases in this island where a chief has been succeeded by a captive taken during a head-hunting expedition, and it is a question whether this is not the orthodox method of succession (RIVERS, 1914, Vol. II: 100)

It is clear that through gift exchange people secured rights and the more generous they could be the greater the degree of autonomy they could exercise such as inviting other lineages on to the *qoqono*. The necessity for these gifts could be waived if the settlers were the close cognatic or affinal kin of the *lekasa* but if he was not a big man or *raokoraeko* he could do little or nothing without the approval of his peers. The system was flexible and what counted for more than anything else was the political power that could be claimed by leaders.

As a nominally matrilineal society the most secure way of gaining access to land was through the maternal uncle (*papa*). He had an obligation to act as elder and guardian to his sisters children. However, strict unilinear descent was rarely followed. Although the rights are not considered to hold the same authority, the father (*mama*) of a daughter whose husband settled locally could grant usufruct as could the grandparents (*taite*). Those adopted into a family regardless of his/her origin were also given rights. Although a lineage might have strong historical claims if its number declined or its *lekasa* did not command authority these rights lapsed. Rights had to be actively asserted. Farmers had to use the

land and stand up and defend their rights if their claims were to be recognised. Weaker *toutou* appear to have surrendered their rights to neighbouring big men and though such "transfer" may not have initially signified permanent alienation, much to the chagrin of those who today claim to be the original occupiers, it is difficult to turn this historical fact around.

The best example is associated with the last really big man on Vella Lavella, Maghratulo. Maghratulo, a non cognatic big man¹¹⁾, organised his followers and slaves to plant many hectares of coconuts along the south Mbilua coast affectively alienating the land from the claimant *toutou*. Maghratulo was also an earlier negotiator in land sales to Europeans. He sold the island of Ozama and Liapari which served to encourage traders to settle, enabled farmers to sell copra and obtain trade goods.

As early as the late nineteenth century a dual system of land holding emerged. Customary land tenure estates in which a fluid and pragmatic interpretation of rules remained possible provided the foundation for the system. Over the top of this was built a superstructure under which another tradition of individual holdings was recognised. Scattered trees and groups of coconut palms had always in a sense been owned and passed down from generation to generation by the empowered individual. This was extended to include the new more extensive, commercial plantations and today it is only when such plantation holders attempt to replant old trees/palms which will prolong their tenure that trouble is bound to start. There was no long term provision made for this contingency and both sides in a dispute can claim with some justification that either by principle or usage their rights have precedence.

Any codification of the rules would change what is a fairly flexible and even vague system that lends itself by past usage to disagreement. What would work better is a local authority of lineage elders and community representatives oriented to the broader purpose of resource management but before discussing this let us look at a marine tenure system in which this solution has been adopted.

Marovo Lagoon¹²⁾

Marovo is an area occupied by a mixture of "salt water" and "bush" people whose lineages are called *butubutu* and the territorial estate *puava*. During contact these people shared much the same experience as those elsewhere in the New Georgia Islands such as those of Roviana and Vella Lavella. People collected heads of enemies to enhance their reputé, traders settled in the lagoon and obtained islands on which to set up commercial operations which included both plantations and stores. New ideas of "ownership" were introduced quite early and actively rejected with the subsequent rise of Silas Ero and the break away from the Methodist church.

Marovo is quite different from Vella Lavella in many ways. First because of the presence of "salt water" people. Second because descent is cognatic and bilateral. Third because of a quite different history of dissent from colonial and mission authority. Let us look very briefly at the latter two points of difference.

Descent An individual inherits access to both land and marine resources through either the mother or the father. Although not complicated by adherence to a weak matrilineal

tradition it is nevertheless extremely complex. The multiplicity of overlapping social relationships means that any given individual has a whole range of options between which he can choose to gain access to resources. If population resource ratios are unfavourably high in one community then an individual can move to another.

Residence further strengthens claims of access to resources and lineage leadership is the responsibility of,

a senior male leader, or *bangara*, who acts as a trustee for the group's corporate holdings in land, reefs and inshore waters. In his leadership task the *bangara* is assisted by a number of elders and "important men" most of whom come from the resident core of the *butubutu* ... (HVIDING, 1988: 24)

Although the rules are a little more straight forward taken on their own they are rarely enough to decide a dispute. For instance all the following have to go to court: If boundaries are not clear and people from neighbouring *puava* fish, take shell fish or extend gardens and plantations on to land claimed by another *butubutu* and the two lineages can not resolve the matter between them. If an individual gives a third party access to resources without first referring the matter to the *bangara* and elders and insists on his right to do this. If a *bangara* gives access to bait fishing, logging or prospecting without seeking the approval of the elders of the community and this is appealed as being unacceptable.

The court becomes a crisis centre and where disputes remain unresolved as on Vella Lavella they can generate a bitter legacy of resentment and tension which can sour relationships and encourage the formation of factions and jealousies that can even lead to violence. Under such unsatisfactory conditions it is difficult to maintain the sort of consensus necessary to manage resources.

What makes Marovo Lagoon different is the political will to overcome these difficulties. **Dissent** Unlike Vella Lavella the Marovo Lagoon was never subject to such intense, monolithic outside interest that it accepted a passive role in relation to government and mission. In raiding days, perhaps partly because of the difficulty of getting hold of iron, tomahawks and guns, communities did not give themselves over quite so wholeheartedly to collecting heads and slaves. As both access to and escape from the lagoon was difficult Marovo did not provide safe harbour for early traders. It lay outside the main focus of foreign interest. When traders later set up inside the lagoon it was at the discretion of a more representative group than made the decision for more ambitious reasons on Vella Lavella. The Methodist Mission did not put enough effort into its work to hold adherents and many joined the Seventh Day Adventist church when it was set up in the early part of the century. After the Second World War the break away Christian Fellowship Church became a centre from which old values of independence were reasserted in a positive and constructive fashion.

This relative neglect helped the people retain a distance from the influence of foreign ideas, direct interference and management. When in the early 1960s the colonial government attempted to get the people of Vangunu to release their land from customary tenure so that the government could set up a forestry project they were surprised by the energy with

which a local leader by the name of David Livingstone KAVUSU set about scuttling the scheme. It was not until the "sale" was just about complete, the required number of public notices posted and the time for objections passed that the community realised what was happening. KAVUSU pursued his protest on behalf of the community as far as the Resident Commissioner and the successful outcome is still talked of with pride. The protest is important because it reminded the people what they can achieve for themselves and retain control over their resources.

The need for proper resource management makes it necessary for people to think of more than just their own personal or family's advantage and KAVUSU's determination showed what could be achieved at least in retaining resources for the community. To build on this was the next and most difficult step.

What Can Be Done?

Many Solomon Islanders believe that sustainable resource management is the most important long term development issue facing their nation. It is an issue that is frequently forgotten in the face of more urgent matters but if nothing is done before the turn of the century it will be all the harder to deal with. A good management strategy must be built on the decision making authority of local institutions and as long as these can not cope with the problems of tenure disputes what hope can there be for more attention to be given to the larger question of resource management?

A large part of the problem is an historical legacy but what has happened in the Marovo Lagoon area shows that people are not captive to their colonial past.

Marovo Lagoon Resource Project (MLRP) This undertaking grew out of a Rain Forest Protection Association and Information Centre set up in 1982 by Vincent VANGUNI and Job Dudley TAUSINGA which was approved by the Marovo Areas Council. As representatives of the Hoava people centred on the villages of Tamaneke and Vakambo they formed not only the Rain Forest Protection Association but also a community organisation known as the Vahole Association. Both were set up in response to what they considered to be misuse of land and marine resources and committed themselves to promoting better management of the Marovo Lagoon environment.

When in 1984 the Commonwealth Science Council set up an Environmental Planning Programme for the Coastal Zone Management of the South Pacific Region (SOPACOAST) it was logical for SOPACOAST and the MLRP to work together. Financial and logistical support was provided by the Solomon Islands government to enable the organisations to hold joint meetings. Over the next few years people discovered that they shared suspicion of large scale development projects and outsiders interested in logging and mining as well as bait fishing. Commonwealth Science Council researchers assisted by MLRP members prepared inventories of local resources and pointed out what was happening to the man:resource ratio and the need for better management. People of Vangunu formed a group of six different *butubutu* called the Kavakasama Association not to take over the role

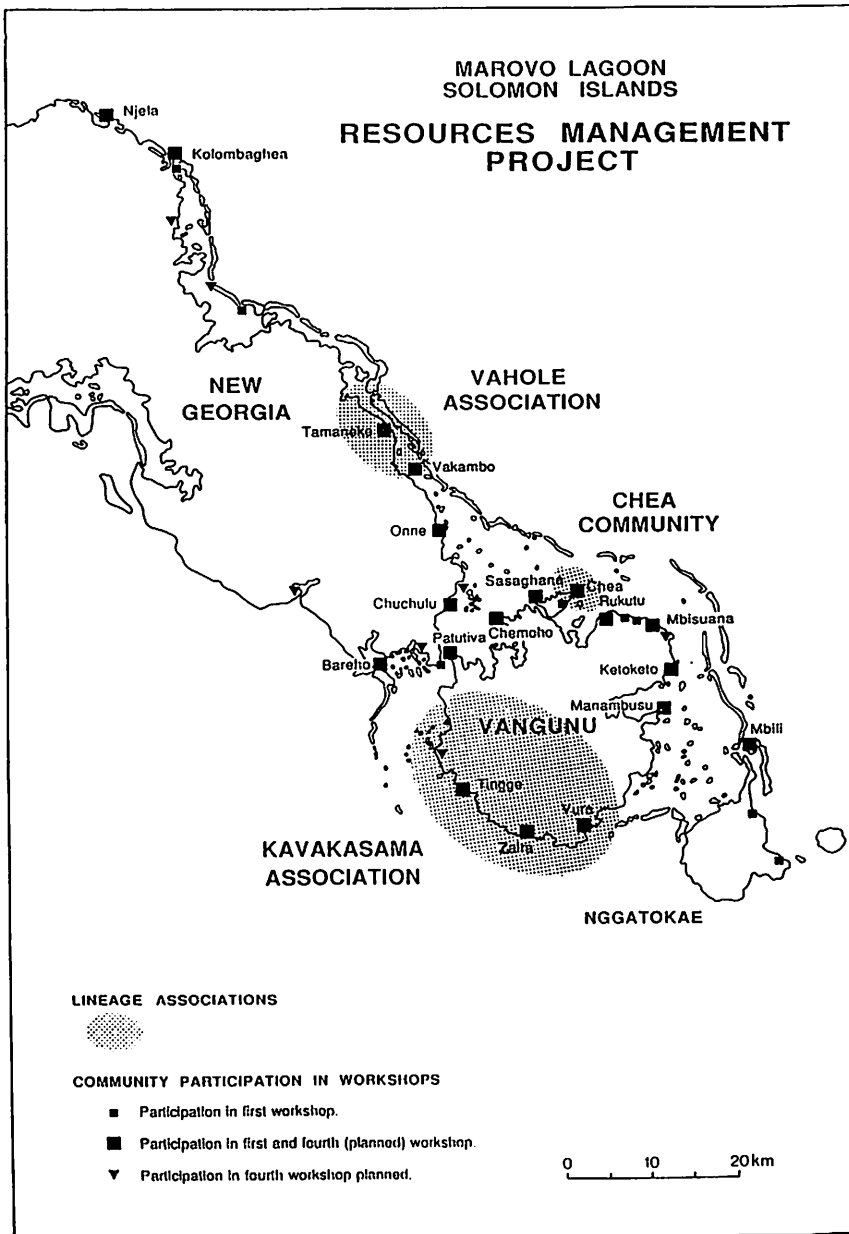


Fig. 6.

of lineage decision making but to look at issues of common interest and concern to all members. The people of Chea formed the Chea Community with the same type of resource management centred constitution¹³). Fig. 6 (p. 113) shows the location of these organisations.

Vincent VANGUNI defines the purpose and objectives,

Before we can think of the whole of the Marovo Lagoon as one there must be agreement first within

each *butubutu* as to how access to land can be negotiated and how problems can be mediated. Resource management had everything to do with tenure. Until we can properly agree on procedures and decide what is proper knowledge about our past, serious misunderstandings will continue to emerge ...

If every *butubutu* resolved these issues for themselves and could come to a good understanding of how many people the *puava* could support, what sort of expenses they had to face and so on ... we would develop a better idea of what we can afford, family planning would become more acceptable.

We must speak to the heart of the people's interest. Help householders to find a way to meet school expenses and look after the forgotten children lost in the middle of big families. If community morale is high, if people feel more secure and know what they can do to help themselves life would be better for all of us (VANGUNI to MCKINNON, February 1990).

What has happened in the Marovo Lagoon has encouraged researchers to observe that "effective people's participation is an essential prerequisite for fisheries development and that people's organisations built of local-level social systems, common property resource ownership and traditional fisheries knowledge are an appropriate basis for such participation" (HVIDING and BAINES, 1992: 1).

It is my experience that any development research that looks at traditional communities, whether fishermen or farmers, if it is to offer advice and intervene in anyway must engage in full consultation with those whom the undertaking most concerns otherwise the work will impose solutions in an imperious way which even if relevant are unlikely to work without the continuing presence of an outside manager to run it. The job of the expert is not to maintain status in the isolation of esoteric knowledge but to adapt their knowledge to the problem.

Researchers have a responsibility to offset the colonial minded officials from central government and foreign experts, critically examine their own reductionist approach that may entirely preclude consideration of traditional knowledge and let the people with whom they are working play a part in what they are doing.

The problem of resource management discussed here has to do with developing an appreciation within the communities concerned that there is a need for such a programme. They know there is a need to resolve tenure issues but are unwilling to do this for themselves as long as a court promises to do it for them. Until a better way can be found of dealing with tenure issues then the chances of better resource management are also dim but each task can serve the other. The current impasse over tenure can be bridged if the more important long term issue can be broached and in the course of considering the resource inventory against population increase come to the realisation that personal interests can be served by sensible community decisions.

One way this can be done is through the extended research undertaken by people like HVIDING and BAINES in cooperation with the people of the Marovo Lagoon but this has now been extended over several years. For the approach to be practical a more rapid form of appraisal is necessary.

What I would like to propose is a new type of research¹⁴⁾ in which the professional training of the social scientist is used in tandem with members of the community and planner/ad-

A NEGOTIATING MODEL

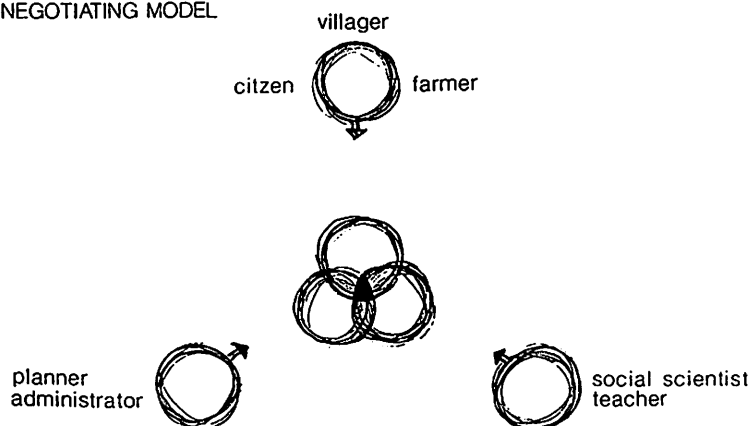


Fig. 7.

ministrator (Fig. 7) to make communities aware of their situation by providing an objective profile of the land, resources, population profile; prepare plans which identify development priorities; use the knowledge of scientific experts in consultation with local people to suggest ways in which resource use can be optimised while also promoting conservation practices; develop ideas and procedures that would help identify ways in which land disputes could be resolved by making use of how this has been done by organisations such as the Vahole Association and the Kavakasama Association.

If we are to be serious about doing something about resource management rather than just talking about it, if we are to mount research that is for people rather than just for ourselves then this is what we should be doing.

Conclusion

In the Western Provinces of the Solomon Islands there are more people requiring access to resources than ever before. Over the past decade the population has grown at an average rate of 3.5 per cent per annum. Nearly half the population is under 15 years of age and will be entering the work force in increasing numbers over the next decade. People are well aware of what money can buy and some want to sell off access to forests, lagoons and land to get hold of additional cash. As increased pressure is being brought to bear it is not clear who has authority to decide what ought to be done. If resources are to be managed in a sustainable way there are real problems to be resolved.

In this paper it has been argued that present issues associated with questions of land and marine tenure have to be solved as part of the problem. This is best done by lineage organisations that have been made aware of the overall constraints on the availability of resources. Local institutions can be strengthened by judicious and sensitive intervention in which participatory research can be used to forge a partnership. Information generated by relevant research can contribute a great deal to the decision making process and enhance the

resolve of communities to make resource management work under traditional tenure.

Notes

- 1) Dependency ratio = $\frac{\text{No. aged 0-14} + \text{No. aged 60+}}{\text{No. aged 15-59}}$
- 2) Villages to the north namely Njela, Mbukombuko and Keru which are part of the Kolombaghea Ward as well as Tamaneke and Vakambo consider themselves, like the population of Vella Lavella to be "bush" as opposed to "salt water" people whose principal skills were agricultural.
- 3) SOPACOAST is the acronym for the South Pacific Coastal Zone Management Programme Project initially funded by the Commonwealth Science Council which following the 5th International Coral Reef Congress held in Tahiti 27 May-5 June 1985 decided to support two pilot projects to set up a model for comprehensive coastal zone management, one for high islands (Marovo) the other for low islands (Pukapuka, Cook Islands).
- 4) These insulated boxes are known as "eskies", an Australian colloquial term.
- 5) KABUTAILAKA provides a brief up to date account of the conflict in Bougainville in the context of a broader discussion of violence in the Southwest Pacific (KABUTAILAKA, 1992: 23-26).
- 6) The situation is not at all life threatening. Broad calculations provided by the National Planning Office indicate that in 1976 the population density of the Solomon Islands averaged 7.1 people/km², Marovo 3.3, Vella Lavella 16.8, Malaita 14.2, cf. Reef Islands 146.7, Tikopia 278.8.
- 7) In the late 60s there were still so many disputes running that researchers were only given access to them for their historical value on the understanding that the information would remain confidential. All alienated land is now registered under the Torrens system under which the government guarantees title. The originals have been relegated to the archives.
- 8) WOODFORD, the British Resident Commissioner, believed that the Solomon Islanders were going to die out.
- 9) For a discussion of the careless way in which land was declared uninhabited readers are advised to consult Judith BENNETT's history of the Solomons (BENNETT, 1987: 131-133).
- 10) Initial fieldwork was carried out 1969/70 and a brief return visit was made in 1985.
- 11) Maghratulo belonged to the Linga Linga lineage and used land in the *qoqono* of the Sikuni *toutou*. He was particularly powerful in the 1880s and became engaged in the copra trade, acquired arms and directed raiding outside the neighbourhood to Isabel. He died in 1894 before the colonial government was set up.
- 12) Fieldwork was carried out in February 1990. I have relied quite heavily on the field reports prepared by Edvard HVIDING and discussions with Graham BAINES, Wilson LILIGETO and Vincent VANGUNI. The interpretation is entirely my own.
- 13) An excellent summary of what has happened in the Marovo Lagoon is provided in HVIDING and BAINES (1992).
- 14) The method of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) as developed at Khon Kaen University, Thailand is relevant but is still oriented to taking information out of rural communities for the purpose of enabling development workers from the outside to work more effectively. The approach proposed here is a grassroots research and educational strategy designed to provide rapid feedback through posting boards, computer generated graphics, maps and so forth.

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