

From the Caribbean to the Pacific: Community Conservation in Small Island States

The islands of St. Lucia in the Caribbean and Espiritu Santo in the Pacific (Figures 1 and 2) are distant from England's Lake District, but the concept of *protected landscapes*, promoted at an international symposium there in 1987 (which produced the Lake District Declaration on protected landscapes), has been adopted by resource owners in these far-flung communities.

Today, the idea of community-based protected areas is taking hold in the Caribbean and the Pacific, typified by the Praslin Protected Landscape in St. Lucia and the Vathek Conservation Area on Espiritu Santo in the Republic of Vanuatu.

Both protected areas came into being in response to the realities of

many small independent island states where efforts in colonial times to establish protected areas on the conventional Yellowstone model largely failed because they lacked the support or involvement of local people in regions where communal ownership was the norm and there was almost no state-owned land.



Figure 1. Location of St. Lucia, Lesser Antilles.

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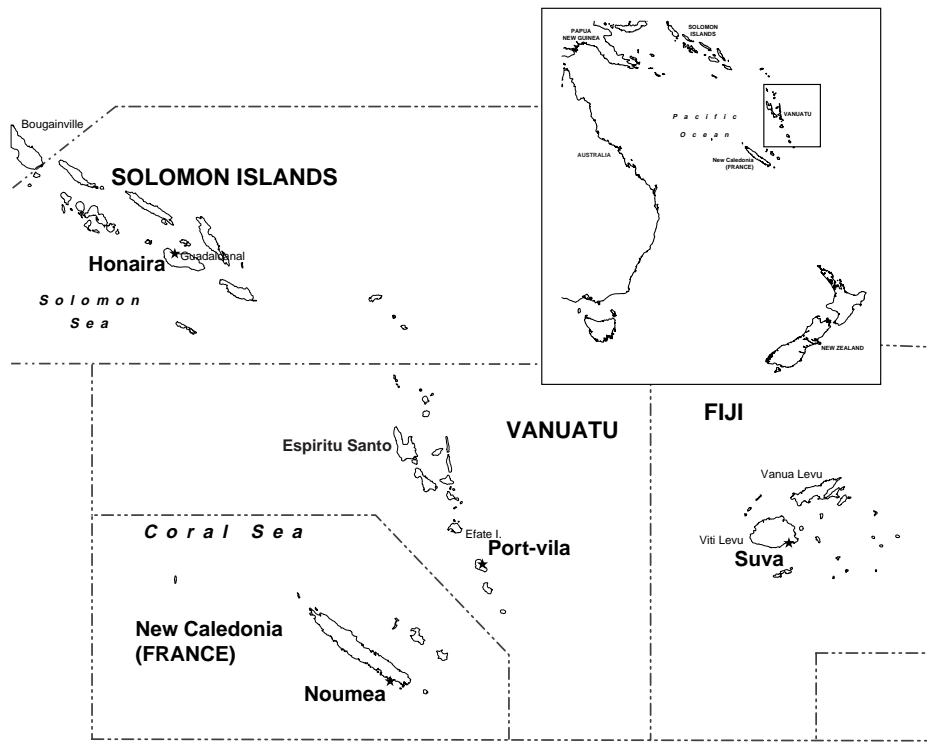


Figure 2. Location of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, South Pacific.

St. Lucia, part of the Lesser Antilles in the Windward Island group in the Caribbean Sea, has an area of 616 sq km and a population of just over 146,000, most of whom occupy the coastal fringe while the rugged interior is forested and provides the main source of the island's water supply.

By any international standard, St. Lucia is a small country with a number of developmental and environmental problems, including high unemployment and underemployment, as well as dependence on an export economy with bananas as the cash

crop and tourism as the fastest-growing sector. Environmental problems vary from deforestation, soil erosion, increasingly high turbidity levels in coastal waters, land and water pollution, and loss of terrestrial and marine biodiversity. Globalisation exacerbates these problems, and is seen as being less sympathetic to small island states. Consequently, the reality of survival at the international, national, and community levels is a critical factor which forms part of the drive towards sustainable development. It is within this context that conservation and

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development strategies must be developed.

The St. Lucia National Trust, a statutory body which receives some support from government, is the main environmental nongovernmental organization (NGO) and has taken a lead in protected areas. The Trust has developed St. Lucia's protected areas plan, which advocates conservation as an indispensable basis for a form of development which is "equitable, sustainable and harmonious." The plan regards natural and cultural resources as the capital on which St. Lucia's development strategy can be built, as the economy is based on these resources.

The Trust presented its proposal for a system of protected areas to the government of St. Lucia after a four-year participatory planning process as a mechanism to maintain that capital, which includes forest, plants, animals, the landscape, water, and culture. With this goal in mind, a protected area is defined in the plan as "portions of the national territory ... which are placed under special management status to ensure that the resources they contain are maintained and made accessible for sustainable uses compatible with conservation requirements."

The Praslin Protected Landscape is one of twenty-seven management areas in St. Lucia's protected areas plan. It covers 874 ha of low-lying coastal lands with xerophytic vegeta-

tion, three offshore islands, coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, mudflats, and a delta. The area is of outstanding natural beauty and is the habitat for several endemics. A key element in maintaining community support is that traditional uses of natural resources by the coastal communities of Praslin and Mamiku continue. The protected landscape incorporates the longest coastal nature trail in St. Lucia (Figure 3), the Fregate Islands Nature Reserve, and Praslin Island, where translocation of an endemic lizard has proved successful.

Over the last five years, the St. Lucia National Trust has engaged the community in a participatory planning process identifying community needs, preparing a community strategic plan, designing and implementing projects to meet community needs, and establishing a development committee which is nationally known and has so grown in stature that it has been able to negotiate with the prime minister of St. Lucia for development projects. The committee is now looking to develop and market the Praslin Protected Landscape as a nature and heritage tourism site (Figures 4 and 5) while traditional canoe-building continues and coastal waters support a thriving industry in seaweed cultivation.

Although it has not been formally designated, the Praslin Protected Landscape has provided St. Lucia

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Figure 3. Eastern nature trail, St. Lucia. *Photograph by St. Lucia National Trust.*



Figure 4. Visitors to the Praslin Protected Landscape. *Photograph by St. Lucia National Trust.*

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Figure 5. Anse Galet (East), Praslin Protected Landscape. *Photograph by St. Lucia National Trust.*

with a working example of multiple-use activities going on without compromising the integrity of the environment.

A parallel development is taking place in the South Pacific in the Republic of Vanuatu, which came into being in 1980 out of the amazing colonial structure of the Condominium of the New Hebrides. Here, the predominantly Melanesian population was governed jointly by Britain and France, with a rigid pecking order and dual school systems using different languages.

Like most small island states, Vanuatu faces socioeconomic problems similar to St. Lucia. Additionally, like most new Pacific nations,

the natural resources of Vanuatu are mostly owned by communities and families. Consequently, efforts by past colonial administrations to establish government-managed protected areas failed miserably, as the people saw the concept as another way of alienating them from their resources. It has taken until the present decade to break this impasse and to seek to ensure conservation of terrestrial and marine resources by blending traditional mechanisms with modern revenue-earning concepts such as ecotourism.

Some 27,000 of Vanuatu's 155,000 people live on Espiritu Santo, the republic's largest island at 4,010 sq km, named by a Spanish

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expedition under Pedro Fernandez de Quiros which came in 1606 to Big Bay in the northern part of Espiritu Santo and established a short-lived settlement there.

The Vatthe Conservation Area at Big Bay lies on an island known to many thousands of American service personnel during World War II. Vatthe means “eye of the sea” and the conservation area there contains the only extensive lowland and limestone forests in Vanuatu not yet logged. And the Vatthe forest could so easily have gone the same way.

The forests are owned by the people of two villages, Sara and Matantas, and they were literally at war over a boundary dispute. Raids on each other’s village were followed by litigation in Vanuatu’s Supreme Court which decided in favour of Sara village but urged negotiation with Matantas because Matantas people had a long history of using the forest.

Into this situation came two New Zealanders. One from a logging company with a suitcase full of dollars—more than these largely subsistence communities could imagine. The logger wanted to buy their trees to be felled. The other person who came was Sue Maturin from New Zealand’s Forest and Bird Society, invited by Vanuatu’s small Environmental Unit to look at the area’s biodiversity values and at ways the communities could generate sustain-

able income from the resources of the forest and sea.

Chief Lus and Chief Moses, the two village leaders, made it clear to both the logger and to Maturin that they didn’t want their forest destroyed but did want to earn some income to give them a better lifestyle. The key to achieving this goal was the intergovernmental South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) based in Samoa with an internationally funded project to support biodiversity conservation in conjunction with sustainable living for communities.

Finally, after a long time of negotiation, Chief Moses and Chief Lus agreed to set aside their differences and signed up to establish a conservation area. To seal the bargain they planted a cycad in a symbolic gesture of peace.

The Vatthe Conservation Area’s 4,200 ha include lowland forests on the alluvial plain and forests on a raised coral escarpment some 4 km inland. Vatthe includes about 250 ha of garden and cropping land as well as the Jordan River and a 500-m riparian zone on its western bank and the black sand beach of Big Bay. Several broad plant associations are represented with the alluvial plains, in particular, supporting species-rich forest.

Now, the communities work cooperatively through a conservation area committee with a conservation area

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support officer funded through SPREP helping the communities establish forest walks, build small tourist bungalows and an equally small restaurant, and train villagers as guides and service providers. The support officer, who is a Vanuatu national, has also seen a community water supply established, and markets and coordinates a modest ecotourism operation with support from the New Zealand government. This brings in useful income and employment, provides a market for cultural products, and protects their forests, fisheries, and way of life.

The two chiefs recently told a visiting group that "We have committed ourselves and our people to working together as stewards for the area so that our children and grandchildren can share the benefits from the forest and the sea."

Vatthe is not alone, as the SPREP project has so far helped twelve Pacific Island nations set up 17 community-based conservation areas on land and water. This represents a huge step forward in fostering conservation in this region of small countries in the vast Pacific.

Praslin in the Caribbean and Vatthe in the Pacific illustrate the opportunities provided by this management category:

- It provides a mechanism to conserve biodiversity in an environment where plants, animals, and people can live in harmony.

- It is particularly valuable where land is in short supply and is under pressure for development.
- It is particularly useful where most of the land is in private or community ownership and acquisition is not an option, allowing for protection through stewardship techniques.
- It is a more politically acceptable management category because traditional and sustainable activities are encouraged rather than eliminated.
- It provides an opportunity to use an integrated approach to sustainable management addressing both environmental and socio-economic development making it particularly relevant in a developing-country context.
- It illustrates the power of participatory planning and co-management of resources leading to community empowerment.
- It enables communities as resource users the opportunity to continue to make a living off the land or sea and create new economic opportunities; for example, in nature and heritage tourism.

The major challenges faced in such small island states are the lack of trained professionals, insufficient published case studies on successful ways and means of establishing pro-

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protected landscapes, and inadequate fiscal and other incentives to support landowners to protect their lands. Though less common, there is still some resistance by governments to share management with communities and NGOs while governments still tend to judge the success of a protected area by its economic usefulness without balancing its biodiversity and intrinsic worth. Appropriate legal mechanisms for protected land-

scapes in small island states remain to be worked out, while funding both the establishment of protected areas and, particularly, their maintenance remains a major problem.

Nevertheless, the experience in St. Lucia and Vanuatu illustrate clearly that the protected landscapes concept offers small island states a vital way forward towards sustainable living.

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